THE 3RD ALTERNATIVE

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There are thousands of books for writers and would-be writers. Some of them are even useful. But a lot more people make a living writing Howtorite books than make a living as a result of them. The 'How To Make A Million With Your Pen In Four Easy Lessons' guide is part of a huge, rich, somewhat distasteful industry, based on two well-known facts about human nature:

1. Everyone who can write a shopping list thinks they could write a book
2. Everyone who thinks they could write a book thinks they *should* write a book

Mat Coward's *Success ... And How To Avoid It* is different. Combining humour with practical information, and based firmly on hard-won personal knowledge, it's a tonic, an antidote, a survival kit for every writer who is fed up with being told how easy it is to write yourself a fortune.

First of all, it's a good read. Ironic, funny, anecdotal, hyperbolic — but always remembering that there is a body of information and advice which, combined with talent, hard work and enormous amounts of luck, might just make the difference to aspiring writers.

Other writers' books say "You can do it, if only you believe in yourself and follow these simple rules." This book says "You might do it, but you should know from the start that there really is, as you have always suspected, an intergalactic conspiracy of space-vampires, Freemasons and commissioning editors dedicated to keeping you in your place. Still, if you are determined to embark on this foolish quest, you'd better read this first." If Ford Prefect wrote a writers' book, this is the one he'd write.

Success ... And How To Avoid It — at last, a hip writers' book which doesn't insult its readers' intelligence. For the first time, a writers' book written by a writer, which would-be writers won't be embarrassed to be seen reading.

'Freelance writing is not a lifestyle choice, it's a masochist's pastime, and in exploring this contention *Success ... And How To Avoid It* brings truth to the old axiom of the desperate: "You've got to laugh!". If bursting into unstoppable fits of convulsive laughter — you know, when your bodily functions are seemingly controlled by some sadistic invisible force — is liable to embarrass you, do not read this book in public'
— Tim Lebbon

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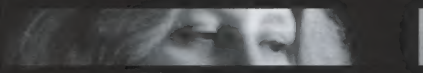

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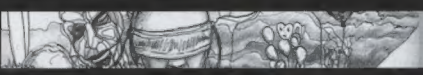

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NEWS FROM TTA

ANDY COX

Slight change of plan regarding our 2004 covers. We were unable to contact damnengine and receive the hi-res versions of the Autumn and Winter pieces in his typically superb series, but at the last minute Richard Marchand kindly supplied this beautiful replacement. Thanks Richard!

Another change this issue is with our regular film column, Electric Darkness. Christopher Fowler will be doing a lot of travelling for a while and won't be seeing as many films, so renowned screenwriter Stephen Volk takes over. If his first column is anything to go by we're in for a real treat. Like all the regular contributors to TTA, Steve now has a message board on our interactive forum (www.ttapress.com/discus), so please drop in if you want to talk about Electric Darkness, Steve's work in films and television, or his fiction.

The arrival of *Interzone* allows us to make other subtle changes to TTA, some more noticeable than others. We feel it would be unwise to continue to compete with *Interzone* for science fiction, and this frees up TTA to concentrate on the type of material which, it is traditionally accepted, it does best. It can focus on its darker side. We are convinced that this will make for a better magazine, one that could even be easier to market and therefore become even more successful. But our biggest responsibility is to you, the reader, and we want to reassure you that the content will still be eclectic and that all the reasons you clearly love the TTA story (and non-fiction, and artwork) will still be present, if anything in even more abundance than before.

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One proposed change is slightly less subtle. Following the above thought process along a bit, to what will inevitably be a slight repositioning in the marketplace, we would like to suggest renaming the magazine. We don't say this lightly, and know that because of the affection and loyalty current readers have for TTA it might be difficult for some of you to accept it, but the problem is that 'The Third Alternative' doesn't – and never has, really – accurately reflect the content of the magazine, and is open to misinterpretation, which can do the magazine harm. At the time of writing we have no fantastic alternatives to run by you, but since the proposal was mentioned on the website's forum a week or two ago (at the time of writing), hundreds have been suggested, along with a great many more messages on the proposed changes in general, some for, some against. It's a very lively discussion and one that I hope you'll want to get involved in. You can always email or send letters if you prefer.

One thing is for sure, and it's that *The 3rd Alternative* will reach at least its fortieth issue and the end of its tenth year with its name intact!

Our first issue of *Interzone* (number 194) is out now! It's a stunning piece of work in every way, due to the artwork and design of Edward Noon; the fiction of Michael Jasper, Jay Lake, Karen Fishler, Steve Mohn, Douglas Smith, Antony Mann; Nick Lowe's long-running column on films; Peter Crowther on graphic novels; Martin Hughes on videogames; comment from Mike O'Driscoll; David Langford's Ansible Link; book reviews, interviews and much more, with more fresh content to debut in future issues.

Also available now is the long-awaited *Success . . . And How To Avoid It* by Mat Coward. Mat is personally signing copies to those who pre-ordered the book and those should be with you soon. The official publication date isn't until November, but TTA readers can buy and receive it now.

There might be adverts in this issue you can turn to for more information, but there's always the insert stitched into the middle of the magazine, which I know you turn to first anyway, just to check if your subscription is due for renewal . . . ◘

GUEST EDITORIAL

THE H-WORD

PAULA GURAN

TTA fiction, as you know, has its own groove. It tends to be dark, but you probably wouldn't define it *only* by that. I think Andy started out using the word 'slipstream' to describe the fiction and I even recall the triumvirate phrase 'science fiction-fantasy-horror' on a cover or two. (Of course, the columnar space I'm nattering in here has seen much polite debate about 'New Weird' and 'Old Peculiar' and labels and what have you.) But, all-in-all, the fact you can't quite define 'TTA fiction' is its best definition and the current cover label, 'extraordinary new fiction', is most apt. Extraordinary: 'very unusual, special, unexpected or strange' (*Cambridge International*); 'very unusual and deserving attention and comment because of being wonderful, excellent, strange, or shocking' (*Encarta*); 'going beyond what is usual, regular, or customary, exceptional to a very marked extent' (*Merriam-Webster*).

Unexpected, strange, shocking; outside and beyond the ordinary. Sounds like what I (and, I hope, you) might call 'horror'.

When *we* consider horror, we're talking about literature that explores the unknown and unknowable, that which is beyond the ordinary. Horror is one of literature's surpassing and eternal forces. But, let's face it, when the word 'horror' is encountered in a literary context, *our* definition does not leap immediately into the average mind.

Five or six years ago, when the h-word was being disdained by the same publishing industry that labeled it in the first place, I thought we should work to bring more folks around to seeing horror our way. We'd weathered that brief period during which readers, writers, and publishers had plunged into the wondrous, apparently infinite, ocean of horror – then drained it dry. The blood-dark sea was declared all mapped and charted. Here be Brand Names. There lies the Isle of Saleable Style. Latitudes and longitudes were set to define and make safe fiction that by its very nature is indefinable and unsafe.

But, of course, that waveless little pond was never really horror. We were happy to see it dry up, hopeful that now we could all get on with our dark voyages on the bounding main of the extraordinary. Unfortunately, the manufactured monster, the beast that defines itself by a brand name, the 'horror writer' (not to be mistaken for the writer who authors horror) managed to piss enough formulaic constricted fiction into the horror puddle to give it a damp sheen and public visibility.

The best horror is written – as it always has been – by writers exploring the extraordinary. I don't blame them or their publishers or their readers for wanting to avoid that polluted puddle.

Oh, I'll still call it horror. Maybe you will, too. Sometimes I might call it science fiction or fantasy or cross-genre or 'the fantastic' or weird or 'new weird' or 'good stuff' or, yeah, extraordinary or who knows what. (I doubt if I'll call it 'interstitial'. I have trouble spelling that.)

But we can't expect most readers to understand that horror, to us and to Ol' Andy means 'extraordinary darkish fiction from imaginative writers' and not 'ordinary schlock confined to the expectation of the derivative'.

How can I be so sure? I was one of those average readers a decade ago. I'd never heard of a single writer you've read here in *The 3rd Alternative*. I'd read some issues of *Asimov's Magazine of Science Fiction* and *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. I'd read lots of 'science fiction' or 'speculative fiction' or 'fantasy' that I *now* call horror. I'd read Lovecraft and plenty of ghost stories and a couple of Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's Saint-Germain books. But, if asked to name some good horror novels, I would have mentioned a couple of Stephen King titles and some Anne Rice. I'd been bowled over by *Ghost Story* by that Peter Straub guy, but for some reason I didn't really think of it as horror. Otherwise, horror, to me, meant silly plots in cheesy paperbacks with lurid covers that would give my kids nightmares.

I was clueless.

That's probably why I became such a cheerleader for horror. It was, for me, new and exciting. I wanted to tell everybody else that they were unaware of some, well, extraordinary new (and old) fiction that they, too, should read.

I still do.

But now I think that calling it horror may not always be a great idea.

Paula's latest project is publishing and she hopes her 'packages' are decently executed (see www.writers.com/publishing). Her website is www.darkecho.com/darkecho and you can communicate via email to darkecho@darkecho.com. Photograph by Ellen Datlow.

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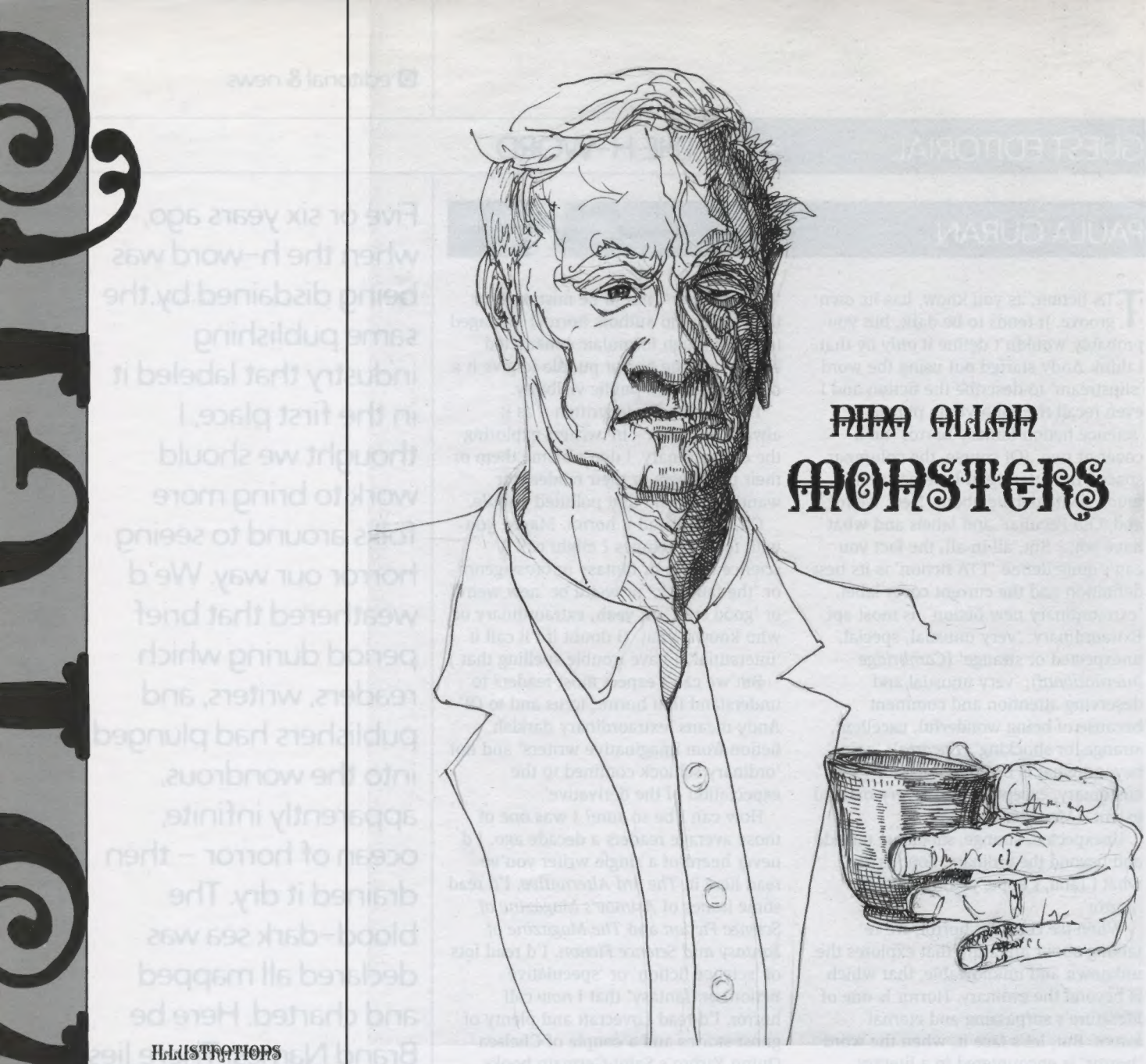


MONSTERS

ILLUSTRATIONS
ARTHUR LOUIS BROUGHTON

At first it was his face, a face she recognised, and then it was simply the face of the man at the next table, whom she did not know at all. He was tall and thin, with a silvery hairline moustache. He was reading the paper, his long-jointed fingers spread spiderlike across the open pages. Jes's eyes wandered from his hands to the hat that rested crown upwards on the pulled-out seat beside him. The hat was a dull olive green, shallow-brimmed, trimmed with a black silk ribbon. Bakersfield, she guessed, or maybe Edmund Malden. Malden's hats were understated and timeless. People of any age could wear them and get away with it. She was not sure of exactly how long she had been in the café. She supposed that her watch was with her plascard and her wallet and her Identiscan, in the self-sealing plastic bag she had seen Dr Michigan's receptionist slide through the hatch to her father. She realised then how strange it was, that the bag had been given to him instead of to her. She wondered how it happened that places like this could rob you of everything, so quickly, and when it might be all right to ask him to give the things back.

Her father stood at the far end of the counter by the cash register, loading chunky white china onto a blue plastic tray. Jes lowered her gaze to the speckled grey formica and drew a hand across the back of her skull, parting her fingers slowly as if running them through hair. The bare skin under her fingertips felt warm and smooth, like the skin of a baby mouse. When she looked up again, her eyes met other eyes, the bald, blue-eyed stare of a girl in the coffee queue with high red stilettos and a shiny black handbag. Her hair was a yellowish gold, with white blonde highlights. When she noticed Jes looking at her, the girl turned away and reached for something on one of the carousels. The back of her dress shimmered, coated with the sticky yellow glow from the striplights. She looked whole and unhurt, like a visitor. Jes watched her until she reached the end of the line, wondering vaguely whom she had come there to see.

The man at the next table folded his paper in two and got to his feet, his spidery legs seeming to telescope upwards like tent poles. For a moment he was the monster again, as he had been before: mousy, receding hairline, camel-coloured, double breasted coat. He glanced quickly at Jes through porcine, colourless lashes, rearranging the paper as if he had something hidden beneath it. Then he was once more himself, a long-legged stranger with an Edmund Malden hat. The particles that made him streamed together, like the components of an army on the move. Michigan had warned her this could happen.

"Hallucinations will be normal," he had said. "At least for a while."

Her father returned with the tea things. As he put down the tray, the things on it slid to the left. A knife fell to the floor, spinning twice in the air before hitting bottom. The impact forced itself into her, hurting her somewhere inside, like the action of metal on slate. Her clasped hands trembled in her lap.

"Sorry," said her father, reaching downwards. His image rippled slightly as he moved, but nonetheless remained composite, recognisable. They had given him a booklet to read that dealt with these things, a slim, white, stapled pamphlet that Jes had once studied in school. 'Extreme sensitivity to any and all sensory stimulus,' it read in paragraph 6. 'Visual disturbances and hallucinations. Increased anxiety or terror. Adverse reaction to light or dark or noise.' Her father put the knife back on the tray, trapping it within the folded diagonal of a paper serviette. He began to arrange things in front of her: a dish of scrambled egg, a steaming cup, a blunt-edged slice of porous yellow cake. The smell of the food repulsed her. She dipped her fork into the mound of congealed yolks and then moved it slowly in the direction of her mouth. The taste was warm and unexpectedly golden. She felt her shoulders relax; the hand holding the fork shivered and then was still.

"I hope this is all right," said her father. "I would have made you something at home, but I haven't had time to go out shopping."

Jes smiled. Her father usually had his meals at work, or else warmed up sachets in the microwave. The idea of him visiting a supermarket was almost surreal.

"This is fine, Dad," she said. She took a warm brown mouthful of the tea.

Her room had been cleaned, but not searched. Things had been lifted, dusted, and replaced. La Gazette lay open on her drawing board, showing a montage of the Bandier show. From the far end of the sewing table, a semicircular hemming needle gleamed against turquoise velvet. On the windowsill stood her father's scarlet shaving mug, full of buttercups and blue nasturtiums. Beneath the canopy of blooms, pale green stems trailed downwards against lacquered metal. Jes dipped her finger into the water and drew it across her forehead. The trail evaporated immediately, leaving no trace. A dog barked in the distance. In one of the driveways across the street, someone was starting a car. In less than an hour, it would have started to get dark.

She lay down on the bed, feeling the freshly starched quilt cover losing its stiffness beneath her. Michigan had told her to get plenty of rest. It seemed too early to think of sleep, and yet Jes found she was already tired. She stretched out her arm to the console beside her, letting her hand wander blindly among the objects it found there: a smooth glass paperweight, a Parker fountain pen that had once belonged to her mother, the rectangular bulk of a book. She had bought Magdalen Sheldon's 'Falkenberg' because the old-fashioned illustration on the jacket had reminded her of Noah. A young man stared out of the picture. His eyes were dark in a lean, pale face. His hand held something pointed, something shiny. On the desk before him lay an unrolled parchment, a wooden globe, an inkwell with a pheasant feather quill. An oil lamp cast syrupy yellow light directly onto the youth's upturned, aquiline features, onto a face that could have been Noah's, should he have lived. The painting was called 'The Physician.' Noah had wanted to become a doctor. He had once described medicine as the most exciting profession in the world. She ran her fingers back and forth over the cover, hazing at the book but not picking it up. The thought of it frightened her, in the same way that the thought of going downstairs and watching a film with her father had frightened her. There were things in both she did not want to find.

She closed her eyes. A grey ambiguity gathered about her feet and began to surge upwards, cloaking her motionless body in defiance of the light. For a second she glimpsed the staircase, its ground glass treads flashing momentarily out of the darkness behind her eyes. She had discovered her imagic sequence without undue effort or confusion at some unspecified point in the week following her sixteenth birthday. Now, she turned from it in panic, with a violence that would have woken her, had she not been already too far gone in sleep.

Her father had left for the depot. At the centre of the kitchen table was a sheet of notepaper and his cellphone. 'If you need me, call,' he had written, circling the final word in dark blue biro. Next to the phone lay her wallet and her keys, her watch and the onyx signet ring he had given her on her eighteenth birthday. She peered into the wallet, seeing at once that her internet pass was there, as was her bank card, her Identiscan, and two new twenty euro notes that had not been there before. Her plascard was gone. Jes gathered the things together and put them inside her bag. She stood still for a moment, leaning forward against the bevelled pine edge of the table. The kitchen seemed different: emptier, perhaps, or maybe larger. She turned round slowly and peered out into the hallway. The door to the lounge stood open, giving on nothing. She realised then that the kitchen looked bigger because it was clean. Her father had washed up his breakfast things, and then put them all away. It was something he seldom did, if ever.

Getting dressed had turned out to be easy. She had put on jeans with a light grey pullon, then a Fabian headpiece in rose pink leopardskin jersey. The headpiece sat close to the skin, and fitted snugly, like a stocking. The Fabian had been one of her earliest designs, and had won her a business development grant from the Brindisi Fund. It was a hat that suited many fabrics and patterns. She touched a hand to her head, folding the soft material back off her forehead and into a narrow cuff. Michigan had told her to try and go out every day. He had said it would be better if she walked with a friend, but there was no-one she wanted to call.

The sky was high and bright, without clouds. Reality seemed highlighted in neon. She stared down at the pavement, focusing on sunbaked guano, a smear of gum, the breadth and number of the grass-caked cracks between the stones. After ten minutes of walking she raised her head and glanced about her. Cars and houses had been stacked in an empty façade at the side of the road. At the corner of her vision a red delivery van moved almost soundlessly along the street, seeming to hover six inches above the tarmac. As the vehicle drew alongside her, Jes looked away, not wanting to see the face of the driver.

On the High Street, people were shopping. In the brashly lit interior of the Serv'n'Save, customers helped themselves to plain brown cardboard boxes from one or another of two bottom-heavy stacks. There was no visible clue as to what the boxes contained. The supermarket's windows had been par-

tially eclipsed by a series of bright orange, hand-printed flyers advertising a concert that had taken place while Jes was still in the clinic. She turned away from the glass and moved on down the street. There were people all around her, but fewer than she had feared. A ponytailed youth in torn Makeze jeans and a Swordsman T-shirt edged past her on the pavement, and Jes realised that she was standing less than fifty metres from the Severn Street Arcade. She crossed the road, watching as the surfer approached the narrow, gated entrance between Cilea's tattoo parlour and the Irvine trainer franchise. He stopped for a moment, putting a hand to his hair and glancing briefly at the outdated array of posters. Then he took a plascard from the back pocket of his jeans and disappeared inside. His place on the pavement was taken by a woman dressed in pale grey sweatpants and a flabby pink moonsmock. The woman's hair was of an indeterminate, mousy shade, hanging dirty and lank to her shoulders. The woman started arguing with the croupier and pretended to go through her pockets. The croupier stood squarely in front of her with his arms folded tightly across his chest. The passing cars cut off their speech, although even from the other side of the road Jes could smell the woman's breath, stale and rank as week-old bread or dried-on sweat.

Jes had collapsed inside the booth, and they had had to unhook her manually from the enablers. She remembered none of it, only Michigan's cut-glass voice saying 'stasis,' and then some other, medical-sounding word she could never remember. She had been told that to even attempt a Virtual Reality connection any time in the next eighteen months would be to risk Permanent Non-Specific Neurological Impairment. She put her face close to the octagonal, tinted window of Philo's boutique, letting her eyes wander over the overpriced, meanly-cut approximations of clothes by Emma Staedtler and Emmanuel Jardin. The mannequins were faceless, with smooth, unrimmed depressions instead of eyes. The monster's reflection, the orbs in its face distinct and therefore anomalous, floated towards her out of the cloudy, tea-coloured glass. Her knuckles tightened. The thing was looking at her, at her reflected face in the makeshift octagonal mirror. Slowly, she began counting the gold-rimmed eyelets on a pair of blue high-top blading boots. She pretended not to see.

It was the same face, a face she had once seen frequently in her dreams and then lost sight of, a face she had recognised immediately on the day the man had come to the door and asked to order a hat.

"Something special," he had said. "For a very special friend."

His speech had been well articulated and precise, although it had a nasal quality, as if he had recently recovered from a cold. She had answered the bell because it was her bell, its dry, metallic rasp setting it apart from the innocuous two-tone chime above the front door. Her father had paid to have it set up, had ordered the small brass plate with her name on it, Jesta Bamber. The man had been wearing a double breasted beige mackintosh, though there had been no sign of coming rain. He was stout, almost fat, filling the coat completely. His hair was brown, fading in places to grey. It receded in a widow's peak, and had been slicked neatly into place with Farley's lotion. The marks of the comb were still clearly visible, running in close, parallel lines across his temples like the tracks of miniature trains. He wore no hat.

He had curled his upper lip in a smile, revealing neat, straight, ivory-coloured teeth each time he had used the word 'special.' Jes had closed the door without saying anything and then stood unmoving in the hallway, staring down at the parquet flooring and then straight ahead at the oblong incision in front of her that was the inside view of the letterbox. She heard cars going by on the street outside, the repeated rattle and hiss of the steam-driven cement mixer from the building lots on Eggesford Road. When, after about twenty minutes, she had opened the door again, the man was gone.

It stood on the pavement behind her, slightly to her right. The six beige buttons on its raincoat superimposed themselves on the clothing in the window, making a mockery of the display. Even in the projected reality of the glass she was aware of its eyelashes, slightly curled and colourless, like those of a pig. Of the hairless backs of its hands, the nails unblemished and smooth as if made of plastic or candlewax.

Three girls, each with cropped silver hair and identical Makeze rucksacks, approached Philo's from the direction of Kentab's Burger Bar and the Weightless Gymnasium. Their triplicate image filled the window for an instant before elbowing its way, laughing, inside the shop. Jes stared through the empty glass, taking in a zip-fronted black leather minidress, the blue blading boots, and a Tove Jonsson camisole covered in iridescent sequins. There was nothing in the window but the clothes. On the pavement behind her, an infant boy tripped over his mother's speeding feet and began to scream. Jes turned away from the noise, catching instead the orange, acrylic smell of SpaceDust on the toddler's out-thrust, triangular tongue.

Somehow, she found her way home.

The psychiatrist's name was Melchior. Jes thought she had seen him before, in her room at the clinic, but did not mention that memory now, as she doubted its veracity. Melchior had wispy, shoulder-length hair and a Scotch tweed jacket. He offered her tea, or mineral water from a cone-shaped crystal carafe. She accepted a glass of the water, running one finger repeatedly down the troughs of its fluted sides. She wondered what would have occurred if she had not turned up for her appointment with Melchior, whether Michigan or one of his assistants would have come after her and put her back inside. She was aware that such things happened, even if they were something that doctors preferred not to discuss.

"That's a beautiful hat," said Melchior. He pointed discreetly at the Fabian, a red silk with thumb-sized appliqué mirrors. "Did you make that one yourself?"

Jes took a sip of the water and nodded. He would know she made hats. She could assume he knew everything about her, or at least those things that could be accessed from her Identiscan. It was harder to believe that people like Melchior could read her thoughts, even though, in a way, that was their job. She took off her hat, folded it in two and laid it in her lap. Melchior stared at her silently without blinking.

"It must have been difficult at school," he said suddenly. "After you lost all your hair."

There were photographs that Jes could look at, photographs of a small angular child with crossed knees, bare feet, and dark brown curls reaching to just below her shoulder blades. The hair crowded around the girl's forehead and cheeks, making her face seem unnaturally small and pale. It was hard for her, now, to associate the child in the pictures with the person she had become.

"Traumatic alopecia is hardly a common condition," Melchior added. "You must have felt very alone."

"Perhaps at first," said Jes. "But people get used to things. I didn't even think about it much."

Melchior sat back on his hands, ignoring the mug of tea that stood in front of him on the table. "Children like to fit in," he said. "Didn't you?"

He continued to peer at her with a fixed, intent expression, straining forward slightly in his seat. He seemed avid for knowledge, hungry for it, like some species of dangerous animal. Jes

stared back at him for a moment and then lowered her eyes. It came to her suddenly that Helios Melchior resembled Vincent Falkenberg, in the book by Magdalen Sheldon. Falkenberg had esteemed knowledge above everything, including his own sanity. She had found the antiquated language of the novel cumbersome and difficult, an impediment to comprehension. Despite this, she had found it hard to put it out of her mind. It was Falkenberg's monster that had captivated her, the monster he had created and then set it loose in the world.

"I didn't think about it much," she repeated. "I just accepted things the way they were."

The dictionary definition of the word monstrous was 'abnormally formed, outrageously wrong.' Among her classmates, Jes had felt herself to be some such malformed curiosity, until everyone had turned sixteen and been issued with VR plascards. After that, she had something to be noticed for other than her bald skull and her dead boyfriend. Their IT teacher, Janis Ballantyne, had called her a natural. Janis Ballantyne had been a large, dough-coloured woman with a nest of untidy hair and outsize gold-rimmed spectacles. She had warned them against using the unlicensed VR machines that one saw at travelling fairgrounds, or the stand-booths behind blackout curtains in the bars of disreputable hotels. She warned that enablers that did not undergo the compulsory twice-yearly inspections were often ineffective and occasionally harmful.

"At the very least, you'd be wasting your money," she had said. She did not attempt to frighten them with stories of VR overload, of permanent memory loss and Non-Specific Neurological Impairment. Jes supposed this was because everyone knew the stories already. Instead, she had described the various commercial and psychometric processes for which VR was customarily employed, and taught them how to develop a personal imagic sequence for access. She referred to the sequence as a visual mantra. Her pupils had shuffled inattentively in their seats, craning their necks in the direction of the headsets and transformers. The majority had used VR illegally already.

"Did you use VR to fit in?" asked Melchior.

"Everyone uses VR," she said, before realising that this was what he had meant. She supposed that was the one true job of psychiatrists: to ensnare people in the trap of their own unguarded words.

He asked her then if she had been hallucinating, and she said no.

"The edges of things look blurred sometimes, or fragmented," she said. "I don't like loud noises. But that's all." She imagined how he might look, were she to tell him about the monster. How his eyes might light up as he leaned forward to study her more closely. She told him that she intended to get straight back to work, that there were many private orders to fulfil. Then the hour seemed to be over. As she got up to leave, Jes wondered what else they might have talked about, things she might have said but already forgotten.

"Do you ever blame yourself?" Melchior said, as she pulled on her hat. "For what happened to Noah Armitage?"

It was odd to hear his name spoken aloud. People never spoke of Noah. Leastways not in front of her. She blinked, remembering the way Morna Sheppard had told her it was best to remember Noah the way he was rather than the way he might have been. Morna Sheppard had been a specialist in post-traumatic disorders, and Jes had told her how hot it had been on the day Noah died. She had described the clothes he had been wearing – cut-off khaki trousers, grass-stained, cerulean T-shirt – and his ironclad determination to study medicine. She had not spoken of the way that Noah had sometimes seemed able to read her mind, of his preference for smiling to laughing aloud, of how they had slept together on several occasions but not made love. She had said nothing to Morna Sheppard about the monster.

"No," she said to Melchior. "Not any more."

As she walked towards the swing doors that would release her from Outpatients, she caught sight of her friend Becca Houston, crossing the chequered maxplas hallway of Admissions. She had not seen the girl for almost a year; now it was impossible to avoid her. Becca was hugely pregnant. Her gravid stomach seemed to ripple and pulse, stretching the bright, florid fabric of her dress in a series of dwarfish protrusions. Jes smiled.

"You look so well," she said. "How long is there left to go?"

"Only three more weeks, thank God," said Becca. She laid both arms across her bloated midriff, as if to protect it. "I heard that you'd been ill." She stood there, hands cupped around her stomach. Jes stared at her, then glanced quickly past her towards the doors.

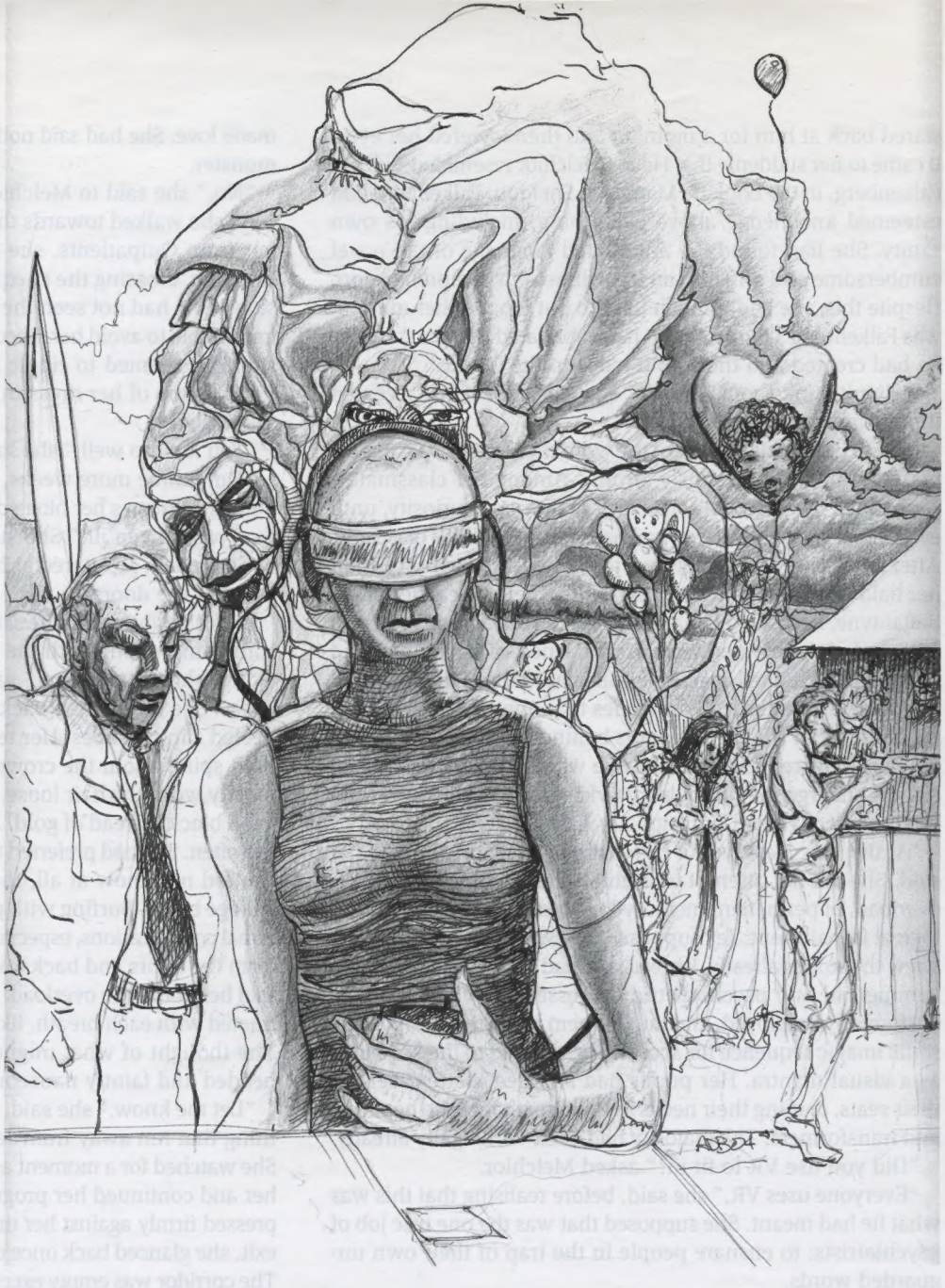
"I'm all right now," she said. "They think there was probably something wrong with the transformer."

"We should meet up," said Becca. "I haven't seen you in ages." She took a step backwards, rocking slightly in her flat heeled slip on shoes. Her red-gold hair had been wound in a tight spiral about the crown of her head. At school, she had mostly worn the hair loose, although in VR it had sometimes been black instead of gold. Jes had not shared scenarios with her often. She had preferred to play alone, or else with someone she did not know at all, the way she had done in the inter-college bouts. Surfing with people you knew could offer emotional complications, especially after the game. She looked away from the doors and back towards Becca, wondering who had told her about the overload. Becca's stomach bloated and contracted with each breath, like the soft leather bag of a bellows. The thought of what might be inside it made her feel lightheaded and faintly nauseous.

"Let me know," she said. Becca said something else, something that ran away from Jes almost as soon as she heard it. She watched for a moment as the pregnant woman turned from her and continued her progress along the corridor, hands still pressed firmly against her unborn child. When Jes reached the exit, she glanced back once over her shoulder. Becca was gone. The corridor was empty except for two nurses wheeling a trolley stacked to overflowing with foodstained crockery. She turned back towards the doors. As she went out, she found herself almost colliding with somebody coming in. He was not quite a fat man, but he was portly, with mousy brown, sharply receding hair. His button-up mackintosh had the bland, sandy hue of amnesia, or congealing porridge.

Her hair had not fallen out all at once, but gradually, over the course of a week. There had been dark, spiralled clumps of it on the pillow in the mornings, silky brown strands adhering to the back of her pullon when she took off her clothes at night. At the end of seven days, the skin covering her skull lay revealed: smooth, unblemished, paler and softer than almost any other part of her. The doctors had said that radical hair loss in the wake of deep distress or trauma was unusual but not unheard of. They said there was a good chance that the hair might even grow back, in time. It never had.

The dreams of the monster had been of far greater account to her than the loss of her hair. By the time the nightmares became less frequent and finally stopped, she had grown to accept hairlessness as her natural state of being. Morna Sheppard had suggested she apply for a graft, but to Jes this seemed somehow dishonest. Even in VR, she had no hair. She made a deep, even incision in the crushed turquoise velvet. The scissors folded in on themselves and then opened again, their



motion smooth and unhurried. The sound they made was arresting, almost musical, like the rending of kitchen foil. Whenever she embarked on a new design, Jes invariably found herself working around the idea of hair, rather than in its service. Hair complicated the clear, pure line of the head. It was easier, at least to begin with, to imagine the hat on someone who was bald.

To go shopping, she had been forced to ride the slamway. The mirror glass, ceramic animals and handmade lace she used for trimming could all be purchased from the vintage boutiques in the town centre, but for more basic materials she had to travel out to the conglomeration of warehouses and factory outlets that formed the Xanadu Industrial Estate. She had moved slowly along the aisles, the great bolts of cloth rearing and jousting around her, like coloured cobras. The eyes of giants seemed to peer at her between the rolls. On the slam-ride back, she had set the shrinkwrapped package of raw linen and red merino on the seat beside her and looked down into her lap. After a while, the sandblasted denim of her Makezes had revealed its secrets to her in an interlocking matrix of woven blue fibre and infinite tiny abrasions. A rust-coloured shieldbug ran fleetingly over her right knee and she had started back, convinced for a moment that the creature had been something other than real.

When the doorbell rang, she froze, the scissors a steel-edged 'v'. She waited for the silence to reassemble itself, but heard instead the repeated rasp of the bell, an insistent chirr, like the call of a metal cicada. She pulled the scissors from the velvet and stood up. On the other side of the door, the staircase swayed. She gripped the edge of the banister and looked over. Three flights down, a stray newspaper circular lay diagonally across the yellow parquet. The front door rattled slightly and then settled back against its hinges. There was a moment's silence, and then the bell sounded again.

On the day that Noah had died, the monster had come up to them in the street and asked

them the way to the Megabyte Café. Noah had written directions on the back of an old Matrix scorecard and handed them over. The monster had said thank you. It had smiled its lip curling, tooth-filled smile, and then it had taken Noah. Jes had seen the monster in her sleep for almost two years. A week after its appearance on her doorstep, she had begun to see it again in VR.

The majority of surfers used assisted scenarios, high-action, sequential programmes that were the intellectual property of terrestrial media corporations. There were also players who had a special interest in zero programmes, unclassified scenarios with serial numbers instead of names, incomprehensible combinations such as SD4000 or WX195. The commercial arcades did not run unclassified scenarios because scientific opinion had identified them as a risk. Unlicensed standbooths were a popular draw in the pubs and the clubs and hotels, but Jes had never been tempted to use them. She had come to find scenarios of any kind restricting, and in the end had devoted herself almost entirely to Freefall. Freefall VR was dependent upon the imaginative impulses of the participant, and many users insisted that it was uneventful and therefore dull. Jes had found it to be an acquired skill. The first few times she had tried Freefall, it had appeared to diverge so little from terrestrial reality that she began to doubt the bionic initiation of her imagic sequence. Then there had been the mimia farm and the labyrinth, and then there had been the monster. The mimias were hamster-sized monkeys entirely without fur, watched over by a hollow-cheeked, bearded hermit with a limp. He had spoken to her kindly, insisting she sit with him a while and get to know the mimias. The monster had not spoken at all, but the sight of it, with its colourless lashes transparent and febrile as the legs of some squalid cellar-dwelling arachnid, had made her temporarily unable to access her exit codes. She had been unable to explain to herself what had made her re-enter, but this she had done, sometimes as many as three times in one terrestrial day. In the fortnight leading up to the overload, her exposure levels had begun to seriously exceed the recommended guidelines, and she had had to bribe a croupier not to scan her plascard. Not all of them would break the rules, but some took the risk, for a price. Once she had discovered which, it had been easy. As she descended the stairs, it came to her that she had sought out the monster in the hope of encountering Noah. There was a tightness then at the back of her throat, a sensation she remembered but found it hard to classify. She blinked her lashless eyes, and swallowed the feeling away.

She opened the door on Becca Houston, who had exchanged the cotton print dress for a pair of denim dungarees and lilac T-shirt. She held something before her, balancing it against the jutting shelf of her swollen blue belly. Its refractive surface glinted, a mosaic of rhomboids, splitting the white light of the afternoon sun into the seven rainbow colours of the spectrum.

"I thought you might like them," said Becca, lifting the thing away from her and holding it at arm's length. "I can't do much at the moment except lumber around the kitchen." Her hands shook slightly as if unable to tolerate the weight they encircled. They were beautiful hands, the fingers long and supple as the prehensile digits of some exotic, tree-dwelling primate. Jes found herself confronting a cylindrical glass jar with a bell-shaped, chrome-coloured lid. Through its transparent exterior she could begin to make out a quantity of sandy-looking, oblate forms that she guessed were probably biscuits. She wondered why she was finding it so difficult to reach out and accept what was offered, then realised that her fingers were still occupied with a pair of scissors. Becca Houston seemed to see the scissors at the same moment. She pulled the jar back a fraction, positioning it in midair directly between the burden of Jesta's hands and her own distended abdomen.

"You're working," she said, raising her eyes briefly in the direction of Jes's face and then dropping them again towards the scissors. "I'm sorry. I should have phoned."

"No," said Jes. She shifted her grip on the scissors, transferring them from her hand to the square back pocket of her jeans. The closed triangular blades slid smoothly downwards, tightening the cloth against her buttocks. Somehow, she managed to grasp the floating jar. She looked at Becca, realising suddenly that she had no idea who the father of her child might be. She wondered if she should ask, but doubted she had the right. There had not been the time to talk about children with Noah, and now the thought of such a thing was strange, too big for her to hold.

"Do you want to come in?" she said. "I could make us something to drink." She clasped her hands together behind her back, then pulled them apart and folded both arms tightly across her chest. She could not imagine what she might do with Becca inside the house. The idea of a pregnant woman climbing the three flights of stairs to her room was almost impossible to contemplate. There were other, bigger, emptier rooms downstairs, of course, but they still made Jes uneasy. She avoided them if she could.

"I think I'll go," said Becca. "You still look very tired."

She walked away from the house, turning the air around her lilac with the colour of her shirt. Jes called something after her, something about the baby. It occurred to her that if she were to ask Becca not to leave, she might turn around and come back. Then she could tell her about the monster, about what had happened to Noah, and even if Becca did not believe everything she might still listen. Becca's hair had been released from its pins and hung loose to the midpoint of her back. It flapped as she walked, wafting up and down like a copper-coloured curtain of shot raw silk. When she reached the corner of the street, she inclined her head so that Jes could see the tip of her freckled nose and the corner of one blue eye. Becca raised a hand quickly and waved. After a minute or so, Jes went back inside and closed the door.

She took the jar into the living room and left it there. Later, her father unscrewed the silver lid and peered inside.

"These are good," he said, taking a semicircular bite from one of the crimped-edged, sugared ovals. "Did you make them yourself?"

"A friend brought them round," said Jes. "This afternoon."

Martin Bamber's expression brightened briefly and then relapsed into sobriety. Jes could not remember the last time she had brought anyone back to the house. In the weeks and months following Noah's death, her father had made spasmodic efforts to trace Jes's mother, but those efforts had all come to nothing. For all Jes knew, her mother might even be dead. At the corner of her vision, something gibbered and lunged. On his evenings off, Martin Bamber liked to download films from the movie channel and watch television until well after midnight. Most of the films were about monsters. Once, she had sat up with him and watched a movie based on the novel by Magdalen Sheldon. Kenn Latimer's Falkenberg had not been the same as the one in the book.

At her next appointment, Melchior poured Jes tea from a rose-covered, porcelain teapot. On the tray next to the teapot was a plate of butter biscuits dusted with sugar.

"What do you remember about the death of Noah Armitage?" asked the doctor. He took a biscuit from the plate and bit into it, reminding Jes momentarily of her father. She added milk to the tea and told Melchior that she and Noah had been talking

about the Manchuria's second scheduled flight to Venus. It had been hot that day, she said. So hot that the soles of their trainers had been tacky against the tarmac.

"I don't remember all that much after that," she said. "A policewoman drove me home, I think, but that was later."

They had picked Noah up from the pavement and laid him on a stretcher. She had watched as they covered him with a yellow plastic sheet and slid him in through the open rear doors of an ambulance. She had wanted to tell them not to do it, that he wouldn't be able to breathe. At some point she had sunk to her knees on the boiling black asphalt. She couldn't remember who had got her back on her feet, just that her legs had been badly sunburned, filthy and sticky with molten flecks of tar. Melchior went on to ask other things, the same questions that had once been put to her by Morna Sheppard. Jes shook her head and took a sip of the tea. Then he asked her if using Virtual Reality had been of any help in her mourning for Noah.

"VR is just a sport," she said. "I enjoyed it because I was good at it."

"The world's greatest surfer is a blind man, did you know that?" said Melchior. "Why do you think that could be?"

Semyon Shevchenko had won the Swordsman, Minotaur Hunter, and Valiant trophies five straight years in a row. He was a retired Ukrainian general who had lost both his eyes in a fire. Jes supposed that for Shevchenko VR synthesis would be so completely enmeshed in the terrestrial plane that initiating the imagic sequence would be as simple as passing through a doorway from one room into another. She supposed that he must habitually achieve one hundred percent symbiosis. Before Shevchenko, the Swordsman International Challenge Cup had been held by a paraplegic violin maker from Wisconsin. The United Kingdom Dragonslayer champion was also a chess Grand Master.

"Optimum internal focus," she said. "Intensity of concentration. Increased ability to shut out peripheral external distractions."

"Maybe such people have fewer external distractions to shut out," said the doctor.

"Being alone doesn't have to mean you're lonely," said Jes. "It just means there's nobody you want to talk to."

She fell silent. Melchior settled back in his seat, flattening the soft brown leather. He put a hand to his head, hooking a stray lock of hair behind one platelike, protruding ear. His colourless, crystalline eyes tracked her own eyes, as if challenging her to make another move. She was reminded again of Vincent Falkenberg, the ambitious young doctor with an expression Magdalen Sheldon had repeatedly referred to as 'wolfen'. It seemed to her suddenly that monsters were even more prevalent now than they had been then, but mostly they stayed inside VR. Vincent Falkenberg had been a genius in search of a comrade; instead had created something aberrant, something that was not even aware of its true nature. Perhaps it had been Falkenberg that was the monster, for rejecting its friendship. All he had really wanted was to be accepted for who he was.

"Do you mean the monster?" said Melchior. A smile brushed at the corner of his expressive, somehow lascivious mouth.

"I'm sorry?" She had not meant the monster at all, she had been thinking of Vincent Falkenberg. Her heart leapt up and then began to pound. She glanced down at her watch, wondering if Melchior had a talent for reading thoughts, after all.

By her watch, it was seven o'clock. The sun had disappeared, but its afterglow lingered, casting the sky above her in a luminous, pink-tinged mauve. There was no queue for the standbooths. The youth at the entrance took her money and handed her a rectangular strip of greenish, semi-transparent Perspex. Embedded in the plastic were four convex, pill-sized metal discs. Jes had never used an unencoded plascard before; she had never had the need to. She hesitated, wondering if there would be any alteration of procedure, but the young man with the crew cut and the grey zipped pullon seemed to have forgotten all about her. Another man had joined him, a scrawny redhead with a Cryptmaster tattoo. They stood side by side, leaning against the yellow-painted barrier rail and talking about someone named Johnny Matthias. On the plywood placard above their heads, strings of coloured lights spelled out the names of the Valiant Regression Demons. One of them was missing an 'i'.

Beyond the curtain, the makeshift arcade was virtually deserted. There were seven machines in all. Five of the booths were empty, their doors concertinaed open. In the centre booth, the transformer had been partially dismantled. A fat woman in grease-stained overalls lay stomach-down on the ground, her right arm buried to the elbow in a jumble of coloured wiring. Only the cubicle furthest to her left appeared to be occupied. The power indicator was switched to 'on', the LED above it pulsed with a blood-red, somehow ineffectual light. Canned music drifted softly from the walls, a vaguely oriental melody that Jes eventually recognised as the theme from the Swordsman cartoons.

She went to the second booth on the right and pulled the door shut behind her. The magnetic seal throbbed beneath her fingers and engaged. The cubicle was small, perhaps half the size of the sit-down booths that were standard in licensed arcades. The flimsy fibreglass walls were covered in transfer stickers and luminous graffiti. Jes slipped off her hat and pushed it into her pocket. Then she reached for the headset and slid the plascard into the narrow, ridged aperture beside the connectors. The padding on the headband was torn and discoloured, but the grid itself appeared to be undamaged. She eased the band into place over her forehead and temples. The grid felt cool and almost weightless against her skull. The pointlights above the connectors flashed in sequence and there was a low, rapid humming as the transformer began to download. Jes closed her eyes and started counting backwards from ten. Somewhere to her left, she could hear the rending of reinforced plastic and a muttered litany of curses. On the other side of her eyelids there burned a flickering luminescence, the white light of starshine, or of diamonds winking from velvet. Then there was nothing but darkness.

The staircase was made of glass. It glinted at her in the nonlight, its surface black as lava, leading away into nothing. Jes descended slowly, numbering her footfalls. Once she was at the bottom, she turned her head and looked backwards over her shoulder. The staircase towered above her, a minute glimpse of infinity. She put out her hand, moving her fingers gently on the Sensolite controls. A point of brightness appeared on the wall in front of her and then moved slowly in a circle like a live flame flowing along a trail of spilled petroleum. The circuit flashed once and then stabilised. It showed an illuminated caricature of the Sorcerer, with electric candle flames for eyes. As Jes watched, the lights that made the picture flared up more brightly and then went out. After a space of seconds they began to come on again, reconfiguring themselves in the familiar shape of the Swordsman. To the right of his head, a number appeared, a cursive figure 2. Electronic copperplate script invited her to select a scenario.

It was a pre-programmed transformer. Either that, or the unencoded plascard would not allow her access to Freefall. She felt no desire to continue. Stretching out her arms to either side, she shuffled along in the darkness, guided forward only by the curiously muffled sounds of the fairground outside.

When at last the heavy blackout curtain brushed against her face, she recoiled sharply, repelled by its unexpected softness.

At the entrance to the arcade, the two youths were still leaning side by side against the barrier.

"But he's an absolute moron," the carrot-top said. "An absolute A-grade troll."

The boy in the zip-up pullon opened his mouth wide in a laugh, and Jes saw that his canines had been filed into two sharp points. Lights rotated on the brightly painted hoarding behind them, throwing variously coloured shadows onto the outsize faces of the Regression Demons. 'Wolverne', read the glittering caption above one of them, and Jes remembered that it should in fact have said Wolverine. She slipped past the youths and wandered away from the standbooth arcade towards the other sideshows. Her green Irvine trainers trod upon grass that had been turned grey by the gathering dusk. The funfair seemed to go on forever.

She heard what sounded like gunfire. Three boys and a girl with corn coloured hair and identical faces aimed silver-barrelled rifles across a shooting gallery counter. A copper-coloured canister exploded, releasing a torrent of phosphorescent polythene spiders. A man in a sequined Stetson darted forward and handed the tow-headed girl a stuffed green alligator. Behind the shooting gallery, the iron arms of the Octopus rose and fell in mesmeric rhythm. The people on the ground craned their necks to stare at the shrunken, barely recognisable faces of the passengers in the gaudy hemispherical cars. A scream drifted slowly downwards on the blue-tinged breeze.

"Oh my god, that's Helen," yelled a black girl in beaded braids and indigo paisley Potemkins. She stuck two fingers into her mouth and whistled skywards through her teeth. There was the sweet and greasy aroma of frying onions, candyfloss, and chilli tortillas. A party of shaven-headed Amigos swept past her in the direction of the slot machines, their bare skulls iridescent with purple tattoos. The Amigos threw jabbed each other in the ribs and threw fake punches, not sparing Jes a glance. She swerved to avoid them, almost tripping over the anchored power line that fed the carousel. A herd of unicorns stampeded towards her and then veered off into the night. She turned hurriedly aside, and found herself staring straight into the darkly deep-set eyes of the Physician.

He sat at the centre of a wooden sideshow stand, darkly motionless amidst a bright tumult of ornamental cutlery, mechanical gyroscopes and cheap brass ornaments of no discernable function. Yellow plastic ducks described incessant slow circles around him, bobbing and occasionally capsizing on a sliver of bright blue water. His hands were smooth and sleek, the hands of a surgeon. Between them lay a clutch of flimsy balsawood rods, each strung with a pink nylon line. At the end of each line hung a hook. Jes caught sight of something small and pale uncurling itself on the man's square black-jacketed shoulder. She moved a step closer and saw that it was the naked, monkeylike body of a mimia. The mimia sat still for a moment, clasping its hands together in a gesture that seemed almost human. Then it sank on all fours and darted away, hiding itself behind the curtain of its keeper's lustrous, shoulder-length brown hair.

"Did you see it?"

Jes wheeled around. Behind her stood a flat-chested adolescent girl in a pair of grass-stained, violet combats. A silver helium balloon in the shape of a heart was attached by a string to her arm. The balloon danced as the girl jabbed a finger at the empty space on the man's dark shoulder. Her voice was high and bright as the balloon. The boy beside her was small and thin, his black eyes shining with something that seemed close to wonder. His khaki cut-offs fell to just below the knee, showing calves that were skinny and white, untainted by the sun.

"Shall we pay for a turn?" he said. "And then we might see it again!" He was holding her hand. The girl's dark brown curls crowded insistently about her forehead and cheeks, making her face look tiny. Her lips glowed in ruddy contrast to her skin.

There had been no damage to Noah. She had seen a glistening crimson line running from mouth to ear, but that was all. There was nothing else to show that he was dead. Afterwards, she had learned that Noah Armitage had suffered a massive internal haemorrhage and instantaneous oblivion. The policewoman had asked her about a car, about the direction it might have come from and what kind of car it had been, but Jes had said nothing. Much later, Morna Sheppard had also talked about the car, saying that anything she could remember might be important, that it might help to find Noah's killer.

"Even the colour," she had said. "If you could just come up with that, it would be something."

Jes had repeated that she didn't know, and in the end Morna Sheppard had stopped asking. Jes had lain awake at night, picturing a road along which many cars processed in a variety of different colours. She tried to imagine what it would be like to pick one out, to know it was the one. But there had been no car. There had only been the monster.

The boy had pale hollow cheeks, and an elegant, aquiline nose. He held the girl's hand fast and led her forward, his knuckles brushing briefly against her thigh. When the man in the camel coat appeared, it seemed that he came out of nowhere. He was middle-aged and pudgy-waisted, his hair in severe recession. He stepped smartly in front of the boy, put out a restraining, manicured hand towards the girl.

"You're both too old for that, surely," he said. "At least, don't waste what you've earned."

His speech sounded nasal, as if he had a cold. He put a plump, pink fist inside the coat and drew out a wallet. His upper lip curled in imitation of a smile, revealing avid white teeth that glistened with spittle.

"Oh thank you, Uncle Matthew," said the girl. She let go the hand of the boy and embraced the monster, putting a wide, open kiss on its overfleshed, rubicund cheek. Then she untied the string from her elbow and held out the silver balloon. It danced in the fragrant space before her, lighter than her breath, lighter than air.

"No," cried Jes. She ran forward, peeling herself away from the shadows. For a second, nobody moved. Then the girl turned towards Jes's cry. Her red lips parted. Her fingers trembled and then sprang apart, releasing the straggly twisted tail of the balloon. The inflated silver heart hovered for a moment above the girl's dark head and then began to drift skywards, glowing softly in the lights from the dodgems and the unicorned roundabout. The monster raised its stocky, beige-mackintoshed arm, catching the end of the string between index finger and fat-fleshed thumb. The girl appeared not to notice. She took one step forward and then another, her eyes wide and bright, on fire with the orange corona of reflected neon.

"Don't," Jes said. The word seemed weightless. It floated soundlessly away from her on the pink-tinged, sugary air. She extended a hand. The girl stepped backwards again, away from her, and in the mirrors that were her eyes Jes saw herself reflected: something skinny and tall, something gangling, with bald head shining and terrible, lashless eyes. Its white-knuckled hands grasped at nothing, its pale lips stretched and gaped over an incomprehensible language. The thing was abnormally formed, outrageously wrong. Jes ran. The grey grass shuddered beneath her. The red Fabian headpiece uncoiled itself in the

pocket of her jeans and slid silently down towards the unseen, resonant earth.

"Hey, your hat!" someone called. She turned for an instant, but did not go back. Somewhere in the uncertain light behind her she saw the monster replacing the wallet in its left inside coat pocket. The balloon still floated upwards from its fist. The dark haired girl was staring at the ground. Even as she increased the distance between them, Jes realised that she had already lost sight of the boy.

Coloured canvas rippled and snagged. It was dark, and there were no more people. With a start, Jes discovered that she had run herself into a blind alley, a long green corridor of box-shaped tents ending in a ragged purple awning. From within the tents came the continuous, low-key humming of invisible machines. She hesitated, her breath catching itself painfully against the ridged interior of her windpipe. She supposed she could slip under the awning, even though it was impossible to know what lay on the other side. She went towards it, no longer trying to run. A heavy tear zigzagged downwards through the baggy mauve expanse, revealing fissures of a brighter light beyond.

The cloth was raw to the touch, loosely woven and porous as cardboard. There was something moving slowly in the grass. When she looked down at her feet, she saw that they were nakedly white, like her skull. A hand protruded from beneath the unhemmed lower edge of the awning, a moon-coloured, crablike entity with long-jointed, scuttling fingers. It curled and uncurled itself, groping at the grass like a ground toad excavating a burrow. It brushed briefly against her toes, its skin smooth and tepid as the oncoming night. Finally it closed itself decisively over something else, something crackling and silvery – a sweet wrapper, perhaps, or a discarded Ferrotox sachet – and withdrew.

Jes seemed to gasp on a vacuum. She stepped backwards and found herself falling. Her bare hands flailed, snatching uselessly at the taut, mudstained diagonal of an outstretched guy rope. The rope whickered against her skin, burning her palms as she slammed face forward into the ground. The force of the impact sent shock waves into her spine and mouth and side that seemed to dissolve her almost to nothing. Then she was crammed back into herself, a spew of viscous liquid in a grime-caked polythene bag. She swam in half-drowned circles, dazed and semiconscious. A whirlpool of coloured lights span lazily out of control in the cavernous space behind her closed right eye.

"For fuck's sake," said the voice. "Are you all right?"

It was the youth with the crew cut and the grey zipped pullon. His grubby, grease-marked fingers had anchored themselves firmly to her shoulders. His mouth was full-lipped and roseate, the soft crimson gape of a schoolboy. He had already taken the band from her forehead. The headset hung straight down from its twisted cord of plastic-coated wire. At the place where the cord went into the wall, a finger-length of alloy gleamed silver against the vinyl. Still holding her, the youth kicked out with his booted right foot at the dented front panel of the transformer. The metal gave a sonorous, mournful boom.

"It's buggered," he said. "Contaminated with one of those fucking zero programmes."

He pulled her backwards out of the cubicle, reached into the pocket of his jeans and secured the magnetic catch with an old-fashioned heavy chain padlock. "Are you alright?" he repeated. "Or shall I get somebody to take you home?"

Jes managed to shake her head. The sky swam. Outside the arcade, everything had the colour of crushed blue velvet. The dodgems squealed, the unicorns reared and then charged. She stepped forward cautiously. The ground seemed to recede before her, like the wavelets of an outgoing tide.

"And he's so into them," the youth was saying. "He talks about those places as if you could go there on holiday or something. I suppose the straight stuff's alright, but I think those zero programmes screw up your mind."

The youth took her arm and began to steer her towards a great illuminated arc through which people streamed noisily in both directions. He continued to tell Jes about his friend Karl, whose main passion in life was for unclassified VR. For the celestial moonscapes populated by rogue female cyborgs, for the mutant-faced, pudgy-fingered savoury drinkers that could liquefy the internal organs with a single fluid movement of the hand.

"You have to stop them taking your stuff," said the boy. He laughed, head back, showing pointed, tobacco-stained teeth. "Because that's the only way they can get to kill you. That's what Karl says, anyway." He sniffed and wiped his nose with the back of his grimy hand. "He said I should try it, but I didn't. Anyway," he said, finally letting go of her arm. "I'm just not into any of that now, not since I took up dirt biking."

They passed through the arc and into the carpark beyond. On the other side of the carpark was the slamway.

She put her face between the curtains and looked out. In a yellow corridor of hazy sunlight at the opposite end of the street, her father was turning the corner towards the depot. She went down the first flight of stairs to the main bathroom, ran a basin full of blood-warm water and immersed her head in it, covering her eyelids. She had a pain behind her right eye, a barbed metallic ache that throbbed in collusion with the substance in her veins. Janis Ballantyne had told them that the new generation of machines had done away entirely with side effects, that a headache was symptomatic of overload, a warning that had to be heeded. Jes wrapped her head in a towel and went back upstairs. As she took the length of crimson merino from its plastic packaging and laid it out on the cutting table, her headache began to clear.

When the doorbell rang, she put her scissors aside on the console and descended to the hall. She found that she was thinking about Becca Houston, about the sun-red hair that fell loosely over her shoulders, about the child that was due to her in less than a fortnight. She wondered if Becca would come inside the house this time, if she were to ask her. They could sit together in the kitchen and drink tea. They could talk, maybe, about the baby.

He was standing on the top step, facing the door, with something scarlet folded between his hands. The camel-coloured raincoat was buttoned all the way to his chin.

"You dropped this, I think," he said in a nasal whine. He held the red thing forward, and Jes saw that it was her hat, the crimson Fabian with the scatter of thumb-sized, appliquéd mirrors. She felt cold inside, as if it were already winter. The mirrors flashed in the sun like frozen raindrops as the red cloth poured like a liquid over the hairless backs of its pudgy, white, manicured hands. Its nails were smooth and unblemished, like candlewax or plastic. Its eyelashes, like cobwebs, had no real colour at all.

Nina Allan has been writing weird fiction since the age of six, and has had stories published in magazines such as *Roadworks*, *Dark Horizons*, and the Tartarus *Strange Tales* anthology. After completing a thesis on the fiction of Vladimir Nabokov, she left the sphere of academe in order to concentrate on her own writing. Nina lives and works in Exeter, Devon, a city famous for its cathedral, its river, and its ghosts. She is currently at work on a novel.

THE DODO HAS LANDED

NOT ALL PROGRESS IS GOOD PROGRESS!

ALLEN ASHLEY

Firstly, whatever you may have seen in the *Time Out* book review pages (Geoff Nicholson's *The Hollywood Dodo*) or on the bright and impressive web pages of the magazine *Albedo One* (a news digest compiled by somebody styling themselves 'The Dodo'), the one and only original Dodo is here: alive and well in the beautiful soft grey pages of TTA. Accept no substitutes, copyists or tribute bands!

Now, I have deliberately developed the reputation for feeling dubious if not downright sniffy about many of the so-called advances of the modern day. But there is one area of which there can be no doubt the world is a better, richer place today. Ladies and gentlemen, we are living in the golden age of crisps. That's potato chips for our American and South African readers. Consider: even your local late-night corner shop offers a selection of kettle chips, hand-made savouries, corn chips, puffed potato snacks and so forth that would astonish a time traveller from the 1960s or even the early seventies.

Frank Smith is generally credited with having invented the crisp and Sir Walter Raleigh with having introduced potatoes into Western culture. The actual amount of potato contained within one 25 or 34 gram bag of crisps is not much more than one potato – the rest is made up of salts, flavourings, oils and puffing the basic spud up beyond its natural size like one of those exotic frogs or lizards in defence mode. For a long time crisps came with the famous tiny blue sachet for you to add your own sodium chloride. This was then superseded by the invention of ready salted – still the bland flavour of choice amongst the grandparent 'I remember rationing' generation of little Englanders. By the mid-1960s, you had the splendid extra choices of salt and vinegar or cheese and onion. Ah, nouvelle cuisine indeed! But wait, Golden Wonder then brought forth roast chicken and smoky bacon flavours. This latter was guaranteed to leave your thumb and index finger red for the remainder of the day. Nobody knew about E numbers in those days, of course. Could we ever be more sophisticated? Smiths hit back with possibly the first commercial attempt at retro appeal with the revival of 'Salt And Shake' – flavourless crisps with the blue salt bag. Unfortunately, this was often missing in action.

By the 1980s a few other companies were starting to get in on the savoury snacks act. Californian corn chips are a much missed favourite as are the 'healthy alternative' of Allinson's peanut butter flavoured Wheat-eats. For those familiar with 'I Heart The 70s' style programmes, these are the crisp equivalent of Aztec bars or platform shoes. There was a lot of shit going down in Thatcher's Britain but one thing the yuppies did help change for the better was this country's eating habits, particularly expectations in restaurants or from takeaway food. Try getting a triangular wrapped tuna and sweetcorn sandwich on the set of *Up the Junction* or some other gritty inner city 1960s blight spot. Now even Costcutters and other supermarkets situated in poorer neighbourhoods sell a range of chilled sarnies.

The crucial decade, however, was the 90s. Two major players emerged. The Leicester based Walkers Crisps – public face still 'loveable' Gary Lineker – bought out Smiths and set about establishing itself as the default choice in shops, pubs and, most importantly, school packed lunches. From Belgium we had the invasion of the 'once you pop you can't stop' tubes of Pringles. The fact that these crisps are thin and brittle made no difference to their core appeal – they spawned the new craze for 'dipping'. No, not picking pockets, but dunking in sweet or gently tart cheese, salsa, thousand island, onion and garlic, thick sauces henceforth universally known as dips. This simple activity brilliantly combined the apparent sophistication of a new taste experience with long-buried infantile memories of dipping 'soldiers' (thin strips of bread) into runny egg yolk. It became a communal activity along with sharing a pizza, watching the game with your mates, slumber parties and whatever else you young folks get up to these days. I mean, can you imagine a decent buffet these days without a selection of crisps and dips?

Yes, crisps are fattening and generally lacking in nutrition despite the occasional spurious newspaper filler along the lines of 'More vitamin C in a bag of cheese and onion than in a fresh apple'. Yes, they're an accompaniment to two of the modern evils bedevilling British society: binge drinking and the culture of the couch potato. Yes, the high salt content is playing havoc with our arteries. Yes, roly-poly Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott has warned us about an 'Obesity Epidemic'. So what? I've converted all of my football team to Marmite flavour crisps and several to Phileas Fogg mini poppadoms. I can stroll up the road to the Turkish supermarket and buy pepper flavoured kettle chips in black foil packets or Walkers ridged paprika crisps in a shiny orange bag. The message is clear: rationing is finally over and the British mindset has moved its tongue on to pastures new. (Who said I couldn't mix metaphors?) Apparently, chicken tikka masala is now the nation's favourite dish ahead of fish and chips. Cookery books sell in their hundreds of thousands. To 'do a Delia' has entered the dictionary. Meals out are within the reach of the ordinary family as a weekly occurrence.

Especially not when most of a bag of crisps is made up of salts, flavourings and oils, puffing the basic spud up beyond its natural size like one of those exotic frogs or lizards in defence mode

It doesn't stop there. Of course, I'm very concerned about the government's pussy-footing around the GM food debate and I realise that we really all should be spending our time on organic home cooking rather than convenience TV dinners. But food is much safer these days. Back when I was a kid you never saw a 'Use By' or 'Sell By' date on anything. Packets and tins slumbered on shelves for months and years and no shopper was any the wiser. Now I know to gobble that low fat Greek yoghurt by Wednesday or dice with deadly bacilli. How many times have you informed someone in Safeway or Tesco that their stock has expired? Unthinkable back in the sixties or seventies.

There's been a recent resurgence of interest in school dinner style food such as spotted dick and semolina. Mrs Dodo was making stew the other night and enquired if I'd like some. 'No thanks,' I responded, 'I eat modern food.'

Not *all* progress is bad!

the black phone
joe hill

The fat man on the other side of the road was about to drop his groceries. He had a paper bag in each arm, and was struggling to jam a key into the back door of his van. Finney sat on the front steps of Poole's Hardware, a bottle of grape soda in one hand, watching it all. The fat man was going to lose his groceries the moment he got the door open. The one in his left arm was already sliding free.

He wasn't any kind of fat, but grotesquely fat. His head had been shaved to a glossy polish, and there were two plump folds of skin where his neck met the base of his skull. He wore a loud Hawaiian shirt – toucans nestled among hanging creepers – although it was too cool for short-sleeves. The wind had a brisk edge, so that Finney was always hunching and turning his face away from it. He wasn't dressed for the weather either. It would've made more sense for him to wait for his father inside, only John Finney didn't like the way old Tremont Poole was always eyeballing him, half-glaring, as if he expected him to break or shoplift something. Finney only went in for grape soda, which he had to have, it was an addiction.

The lock popped and the rear door of the van sprang open. What happened next was such a perfect bit of slapstick it might have been practiced – and only later did it occur to Finney that probably it had been. The back of the van contained a gathering of balloons, and the moment the door was open, they shoved their way out in a jostling mass . . . thrusting themselves at the fat man, who reacted as if he had no idea they would be there. He leaped back. The bag under his left arm fell, hit the ground, split open. Oranges rolled crazily this way and that. The fat man wobbled and his sunglasses slipped off his face. He recovered and hopped on his toes, snatching at the balloons, but it was already too late, they were sailing away, out of reach.

The fat man cursed and waved a hand at them in a gesture of angry dismissal. He turned away, squinted at the ground and then sank to his knees. He set his other bag in the back of the van and began to explore the pavement with his hands, feeling for his glasses. He put a hand down on an egg, which splintered beneath his palm. He grimaced, shook his hand in the air. Shiny strings of egg white spattered off it.

By then, Finney was already trotting across the road, left his soda behind on the stoop. "Help mister?"

The fat man peered blearily up at him without seeming to see him. "Did you observe that bullshit?"

Finney glanced down the road. The balloons were thirty feet off the ground by now, following the double line along the middle of the road. They were black . . . all of them, as black as sealskin.

"Yeah. Yeah, I – " he said, and then his voice trailed off and he frowned, watching the balloons bobbing into the low overcast of the sky. The sight of them disturbed him in some way. No one wanted black balloons; what were they good for, anyway? Festive funerals? He stared, briefly transfixed, thinking of poisoned grapes. He moved his tongue around in his mouth, and noticed for the first time that his beloved grape soda left a disagreeable metallic aftertaste, a taste like he had been chewing an exposed copper wire.

The fat man brought him out of it. "See my glasses?"

Finney lowered himself to one knee, leaned forward to look beneath the van. The fat man's glasses were under the bumper.

"Got 'em," he said, stretching an arm past the fat man's leg to pick them up. "What were the balloons for?"

"I'm a part-time clown," said the fat man. He was reaching into the van, getting something out of the paper bag he had set down there. "Call me Al. Hey, you want to see something funny?"

Finney glanced up, had time to see Al holding a steel can, yellow and black, with pictures of wasps on it. He was shaking it furiously. Finney began to smile, had the wild idea that Al was about to spray him with silly string.

The part-time clown hit him in the face with a blast of white foam. Finney started to turn his head away, but was too slow to avoid getting it in his eyes. He screamed and took some in the mouth, tasted something harsh and chemical. His eyes were coals, cooking in their sockets. His throat burned, in his entire life he had never felt any pain like it, a searing icy-heat. His stomach heaved and the grape soda came back up in a hot, sweet rush.

Al had him by the back of the neck and was pulling him forward, into the van. Finney's eyes were open but all he could see were pulsations of orange and oily brown that flared, dripped, ran into one another and faded. The fat man had a fistful of his hair and another hand between his legs, scooping him up by the crotch. The inside of Al's arm brushed his cheek. Finney turned his head and bit down on a mouthful of wobbling fat, squeezed until he tasted blood.

The fat man wailed and let go and for a moment Finney had his feet on the ground again. He stepped back and put his heel on an orange. His ankle folded. He tottered, almost fell and then the fat man had him by the neck again. He shoved him forward. Finney hit one of the van's rear doors, head-first, with a low bonging sound, and all the strength went out of his legs.

Albert had an arm under his chest, tipped him forward, into a coal chute. Then he let go, and Finney dropped, with a horrifying velocity, into darkness.

A door banged open. His feet and knees were sliding across linoleum. He couldn't see much, was pulled through darkness toward a faint fluttering moth of gray light that was always dancing away from him. Another door went crash and he was dragged down a flight of stairs. His knees clubbed each step on the way down.

Al said, "Fucking arm. I ought to snap your neck right now, what you did to my arm."

Finney thought of resisting. They were distant, abstract thoughts. He heard a bolt turn, and he was pulled through a last door, across cement, and finally to a mattress. Al flipped him onto it. The world did a slow, nauseating roll. Finney sprawled on his back and waited for the feeling of motion sickness to pass.

Al sat down beside him, panting for breath. "Jesus, I'm covered in blood. Like I killed someone. Look at this arm," he said. Then he laughed, husky, disbelieving laughter. "Not that you can see anything."

Neither of them spoke, and an awful silence settled upon the room. Finney shook continuously, had been shivering steadily, more or less since regaining consciousness.

At last Albert spoke. "I know you're scared of me, but I won't hurt you anymore. What I said about I ought to snap your neck, I was just angry. You did a number on my arm, but I won't hold it against you. I guess it makes us even. You don't need to be scared because nothing bad is going to happen to you here. You got my word, Johnny."

At the mention of his name, Finney went perfectly still, abruptly stopped trembling. It wasn't just that the fat man knew his name. It was the way he said it . . . his breath a little trill of excitement. *Johnny.* Finney felt a ticklish sensation crawling across his scalp, and realized Al was playing with his hair.

"You want a soda? Tell you what, I'll bring you a soda and then – wait! Did you hear the phone?" Al's voice suddenly wavering a little. "Did you hear a phone ringing somewhere?"

From an unguessable distance, Finney heard the soft burr of a telephone.

"Oh shit," Al said. He exhaled unsteadily. "That's just the phone in the kitchen. Of course it's just the phone in – okay. I'll go see who it is and get you that soda and come right back and then I'll explain everything."

Finney heard him come up off the mattress with a labored sigh, followed the scuffle of his boots as he moved away. A door thumped shut. A bolt slammed. If the phone upstairs rang again, Finney didn't hear it.

He didn't know what Al was going to say when he came back, but he didn't need to explain anything. Finney already knew all about it.

The first child to disappear had been taken two years ago, just after the last of the winter's snow melted. The hill behind St. Luke's was a lumpy slope of greasy mud, so slippery, kids were going down it on sleds, cracking each other up when they crashed at the bottom. A nine-year-old named Loren ran into the brush on the far side of Mission Road to take a whiz, and never came back. Another boy went missing two months later, on the first of June. The papers named the kidnapper The Galesburg Grabber, a name Finney felt lacked something on Jack the Ripper. He took a third boy on the first of October, when the air was aromatic with the smell of dead leaves crunching underfoot.

That night, John and his older sister Susannah sat at the top of the stairs, and listened to their parents arguing in the kitchen. Their mother wanted to sell the house, move away, and their father said he hated when she got hysterical. Something fell over or was thrown. Their mother said she couldn't stand him anymore, was going crazy living with him. Their father said so don't and turned on the TV.

Eight weeks later, at the very end of November, the Galesburg Grabber took Bruce Yamada.

Finney wasn't friends with Bruce Yamada, had never even had a conversation with him – but he had known him. They had pitched against each other, the summer before Bruce disappeared. Bruce Yamada was maybe the best pitcher the Galesburg Cardinals had ever faced; certainly the hardest thrower. The ball sounded different when he threw it in the catcher's glove, not like it sounded when other kids threw. When Bruce Yamada threw, it was like the sound of someone opening the champagne.

Finney pitched well himself, giving up just a pair of runs, and those only because Jay McGinty dropped a big lazy fly to left that anyone else would've caught. After the game – Galesburg lost five to one – the teams formed into two lines, and started to march past each other, slapping gloves. It was when Bruce and Finney met each other to touch gloves that they spoke to each other for the one and only time in Bruce's life.

"You were dirty," Bruce said.

Finney was flustered with happy surprise, opened his mouth to reply – but all that came out was "Good game," same as he said to everyone. It was a thoughtless, automatic line, repeated twenty straight times, and it was said before he could help himself. Later, though, he wished he had come up with something as cool as *you were dirty*, something that really smoked.

He didn't run into Bruce again the rest of the summer, and when he did finally happen to see him – coming out of the movies that Fall – they didn't speak, just nodded to each other. A few weeks later, Bruce strolled out of the Space Port arcade, told his friends he was walking home, and never got there. The dragnet turned up one of his sneakers in the gutter on Circus Street. It stunned Finney to think a boy he knew had been stolen away, yanked right out of his shoes, and was never coming back. Was already dead somewhere, with dirt in his face and bugs in his hair and his eyes open and staring at exactly nothing.

But then a year passed, and more, and no other kids disappeared, and Finney turned thirteen, a safe age – the person snatching children had never bothered with anyone older than twelve. People thought the Galesburg Grabber had moved away, or been arrested for some other crime, or died. Maybe Bruce Yamada killed him, Finney thought once, after hearing two adults wonder aloud whatever happened to the Grabber. Maybe Bruce Yamada picked up a rock as he was being kidnapped, and later saw a chance to show the Galesburg Grabber his fastball. There was a hell of an idea.

Only Bruce didn't kill the Grabber, the Grabber had killed him, like he had killed three others, and like he was going to kill Finney. Finney was one of the black balloons now. There was no one to pull him back, no way to turn himself around. He was sailing away from everything he knew, into a future that stretched open before him, as vast and alien as the winter sky.

He risked opening his eyes. The air stung his eyeballs, and it was like looking through a Coke bottle, everything distorted and tinted an unlikely shade of green, although that was an improvement on not being able to see at all. He was on a mattress at one end of a room with white plaster walls. The walls seemed to

bend in at the top and bottom, enclosing the world between like a pair of white parentheses. He assumed – hoped – this was only an illusion created by his poisoned eyes.

Finney couldn't see to the far end of the room, couldn't see the door he had been brought in through. He might have been underwater, peering into silty jade depths, a diver in the cabin room of a sunken cruise liner. To his left was a toilet with no seat. To his right, midway down the room, was a black box or cabinet bolted to the wall. At first he couldn't recognize it for what it was, not because of his unclear vision, but because it was so out of place, a thing that didn't belong in a prison cell.

A phone. A large, old-fashioned, black phone, the receiver hanging from a silver cradle on the side.

Al wouldn't have left him in a room with a working phone. If it worked, one of the other boys would've used it. Finney knew that, but he felt a thrill of hope anyway, so intense it almost brought tears to his eyes. Maybe he had recovered faster than the other boys. Maybe the others were still blind from the wasp poison when Al killed them, never even knew about the phone. He grimaced, appalled by the force of his own longing. But then he started crawling toward it, plunged off the edge of the mattress and fell to the floor, three stories below. His chin hit the cement. A black flash bulb blinked in the front of his brain, just behind his eyes.

He pushed himself up on all fours, shaking his head slowly from side to side, insensible for a moment, then recovering himself. He started to crawl. He crossed a great deal of floor without seeming to get any closer to the phone. It was as if he were on a conveyer belt, bearing him steadily back, even as he plodded forward on hands and knees. Sometimes when he squinted at the phone, it seemed to be breathing, the sides swelling and then bending inward. Once, Finney had to stop to rest his hot forehead against the icy concrete. It was the only way to make the room stop moving.

When he next looked up, he found the phone directly above him. He pulled himself to his feet, grabbing the phone as soon as it was in reach and using it to hoist himself up. It was not quite an antique, but certainly old, with a pair of round silver bells on top and a clapper between them, a dial instead of buttons. Finney found the receiver and held it to his ear, listened for dial tone. Nothing. He pushed the silver cradle down, let it spring back up. The black phone remained silent. He dialed for the operator. The receiver went *click-click-click* in his ear, but there was no ring on the other end, no connection.

"It doesn't work," Al said. "It hasn't worked since I was a kid."

Finney swayed on his heels, then steadied himself. He for some reason didn't want to turn his head and make eye contact with his captor, and he allowed himself only a sideways glance at him. The door was close enough to see now, and Al stood in it.

"Hang up," he said, but Finney stood as he was, the receiver in one hand. After a moment, Al went on, "I know you're scared and you want to go home. I'm going to take you home soon. I just – everything's all fucked up and I have to be upstairs for a while. Something's come up."

"What?"

"Never mind what."

Another helpless, awful surge of hope. Poole maybe – old Mr Poole had seen Albert shoving him into the van and called the police. "Did someone see something? Are the police coming? If you let me go, I won't tell, I won't – "

"No," the fat man said, and laughed, harshly and unhappily. "Not the police."

"Someone though? Someone's coming?"

The kidnapper stiffened, and the close-set eyes in his wide, homely face were stricken and wondering. He didn't reply, but he didn't need to. The answer Finney wanted was there in his look, his body language. Either someone was on the way – or already there, upstairs somewhere.

"I'll scream," Finney said. "If there's someone upstairs, they'll hear me."

"No he won't. Not with the door shut."

"He?"

Al's face darkened, the blood rushing to his cheeks. Finney watched his hands squeeze into fists, then open slowly again.

"When the door's shut you can't hear anything down here," Al went on, in a tone of forced calm. "I soundproofed it myself. So shout if you want, you won't bother anyone."

"You're the one who killed those other kids."

"No. Not me. That was someone else. I'm not going to make you do anything you won't like."

Something about the construction of this phrase – *I'm not going to make you do anything you won't like* – brought a fever heat to Finney's face and left his body cold, roughened with gooseflesh.

"If you try to touch me I'll scratch your face and whoever is coming to see you will ask why."

Albert gazed at him blankly for a moment, absorbing this, then said, "You can hang up the phone now."

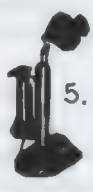
Finney set the receiver back in the cradle.

"I was in here and it rang once," Al said. "Creepiest thing. I think static electricity does it. It went off once when I was standing right beside it, and I picked it up, without thinking, you know, to see if anyone was there."

Finney didn't want to make conversation with someone who meant to kill him at the first convenient opportunity, and was taken by surprise when he opened his mouth and heard himself asking a question. "Was there?"

"No. Didn't I say it doesn't work?"

The door opened and shut. In the instant it was ajar, the great, ungainly fat man slipped himself out, bouncing on his toes – a hippo performing ballet – and was gone before Finney could open his mouth to yell.



5.

He screamed anyway. Screamed and threw himself at the door, crashing his whole body against it, not imagining it could be knocked open, but thinking if there was someone upstairs they might hear it banging in the frame. He didn't shout until his throat was raw, though; a few times was enough to satisfy him that no one was going to hear.

Finney quit hollering to peer around his underwater compartment, trying to figure where the light was coming from. There were two little windows – long glass slots – set high in the wall, well out of easy reach, emitting some faint, weed green light. Rusty grills had been bolted across them.

Finney studied one of the windows for a long time, then ran at the wall, didn't give himself time to think how drained and sick he was, planted a foot against the plaster and leaped. For one moment he grabbed the grill, but the steel links were too close together to squeeze a finger in, and he dropped back to his heels, then fell on his rear, shivering violently. Still. He had been up there long enough to get a glimpse through the filth-obscured glass. It was a double window, ground-level, almost completely hidden behind strangling brush. If he could break it, someone might hear him shouting.

They all thought of that, he thought. *And you see how far it got them.*

He went around the room again, and found himself standing

before the phone once more. Studying it. His gaze tracked a slender black wire, stapled to the plaster above it. It climbed the wall for about a foot, then ended in a spray of frayed copper filaments. Finney discovered he was holding the receiver again, had picked it up without knowing he was doing it, was even holding it to his ear . . . an unconscious act of such hopeless, awful want, it made him shrink into himself a little. Why would anyone put a phone in their basement? But then there was the toilet, too. Maybe, probably – awful thought – someone had once lived in this room.

Then he was on the mattress, staring through the jade murk at the ceiling. He noted, for the first time, that he hadn't cried, and didn't feel like he was going to. He was very intentionally resting, building up his energy for the next round of exploration and thought. Would be circling the room, looking for an advantage, something he could use, until Al came back. Finney could hurt him if he had anything, anything at all, to use as a weapon. A piece of broken glass, a rusted spring. Were there springs in the mattress? When he had the energy to move again he'd try and figure out.

By now his parents had to know something had happened to him. They had to be frantic. But when he tried to picture the search, he didn't visualize his weeping mother answering a detective's questions in her kitchen, and he didn't see his father, out in front of Poole's Hardware, turning away from the sight of a policeman carrying an empty bottle of grape soda in an evidence bag.

Instead, he imagined Susannah, standing on the pedals of her ten-speed and gliding down the center of one wide residential avenue after another, the collar of her denim jacket turned up, grimacing into the icy sheer of the wind. Susannah was three years older than Finney, but they had both been born on the same day, June 21st, a fact she held to be of mystical importance. Susannah had a lot of occultish ideas, owned a deck of Tarot cards, read books about the connection between Stonehenge and aliens. When they were younger, Susannah had a toy stethoscope, which she would press to his head, in an attempt to listen in on his thoughts. He had once drawn five cards out of a deck at random and she had guessed all of them, one after another, holding the end of the stethoscope to the center of his forehead – five of spades, six of clubs, ten and jack of diamonds, ace of hearts – but she had never been able to repeat the trick.

Finney saw his older sister searching for him down streets that were, in his imagination, free of pedestrians or traffic. The wind was in the trees, flinging the bare branches back and forth so they appeared to rake futilely at the low sky. Sometimes Susannah half-closed her eyes, as if to better concentrate on some distant sound calling to her. She was listening for him, for his unspoken cry, hoping to be guided to him by some trick of telepathy.

She made a left, then a right, moving automatically, and discovered a street she had never seen before, a dead end road. On either side of it were disused looking ranches with unraked front lawns, children's toys left out in driveways. At the sight of this street, her blood quickened. She felt strongly that Finney's kidnapper lived somewhere on this road. She biked more slowly, turning her head from side to side, making an uneasy inspection of each house as she went by. The whole road seemed set in a state of improbable silence, as if every person on it had been evacuated weeks ago, taking their pets with them, locking all the doors, turning out all the lights.

Not this one, she thought. *Not that one.* And on and on, to the dead-end of the street, and the last of the houses.

She put a foot down, stood in place with her bike under her. She hadn't felt hopeless yet, but standing there, chewing her lip and looking around, the thought began to form that she wasn't going to find her brother, that no one was going to find him. It was an awful street, and the wind was cold. She imagined she could feel that cold inside her, a ticklish chill behind the breastbone.

In the next moment she heard a sound, a tinny twanging, which echoed strangely. She glanced around, trying to place it, lifted her gaze to the last telephone pole on the street. A mass of black balloons were caught there, snarled in the lines. The wind was wrestling to wrench them free, and they bobbled and weaved, pulling hard to escape. The wires held the balloons implacably where they were. She recoiled at the sight of them. They were dreadful – somehow they were dreadful – a dead spot in the sky. The wind plucked at the wires, and made them ring.

When the phone rang Finney opened his eyes. The vivid little story he had been telling himself about Susannah fleeted away. Only a story, not a vision; a ghost story, and he was the ghost, or would be soon. He lifted his head from the mattress, startled to find it almost dark . . . and his gaze fell upon the black phone. It seemed to him that the air was still faintly vibrating, from the brash firehouse clang of the steel clapper on the rusty bells.

He pushed himself up. He knew the phone couldn't really ring – that hearing it had just been a trick of his sleeping mind – yet he half-expected it to ring again. It had been stupid to lay there, dreaming the daylight away. He needed an advantage, a bent nail, a stone to throw. In a short time it would be dark, and he couldn't search the room if he couldn't see. He stood. He felt spacey, empty-headed and cold, it was cold in the basement. He walked to the phone, put the receiver to his ear.

"Hello?" he asked.

He heard the wind sing, outside the windows. He listened to the dead line. As he was about to hang up, he thought he heard a click on the other end.

"Hello?" he asked.

6.

When the darkness gathered itself up and fell upon him, he curled himself on the mattress, with his knees close to his chest. He didn't sleep. He hardly blinked. He waited for the door to open and the fat man to come in and shut it behind him, for the two of them to be alone in the dark together, but Al didn't come. Finney was empty of thought, all his concentration bent to the dry rap of his pulse, and the distant rush of the wind beyond the high windows. He was not afraid. What he felt was something larger than fear, a narcotic terror that numbed him completely, made it impossible to imagine moving.

He did not sleep, he was not awake. Minutes did not pass, collecting into hours. There was no point in thinking about time in the old way. There was only one moment and then another moment, in a string of moments that went on in a quiet, deadly procession. He was roused from his dreamless paralysis only when one of the windows began to show, a rectangle of watery gray floating high in the darkness. He knew, without knowing at first how he could know, that he wasn't meant to live to see the window painted with dawn. The thought didn't inspire hope exactly, but it did inspire movement and with great effort he sat up.

His eyes were better. When he stared at the glowing window, he saw twinkling, prismatic lights at the edge of his vision . . . but he was seeing the window clearly, nonetheless. His stomach cramped from emptiness.

Finney forced himself to stand and began to patrol the room

POOLE'S
HARDWARE
GROCERIES
SODA
LIQUOR

again, looking for his advantage.

In a back corner of the room, he found a place where a patch of cement floor had crumbled into granular, popcorn-sized chunks, with a layer of sandy earth beneath. He was putting a handful of carefully selected nuggets into his pocket when he heard the thump of the bolt turning.

The fat man stood in the doorway. They regarded each other across a distance of five yards. Al wore striped boxers and a white undershirt, stained down the front with old sweat. His fat legs were shocking in their paleness.

"I want breakfast," Finney said. "I'm hungry."

"How's your eyes?"

Finney didn't reply.

"What are you doing over there?"

Finney squatted in the corner, glaring.

Al said,"I can't bring you anything to eat. You'll have to wait."

"Why? Is there someone upstairs who would see you taking me food?"

Again, his face darkened, his hands squeezed into fists. When he replied, however, his tone was not angry, but glum and defeated. "Never mind." Finney took that to mean *yes*.

"If you aren't going to feed me why did you even come down here?" Finney asked him.

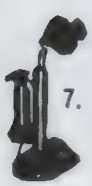
Al shook his head, staring at Finney with a kind of morose resentment, as if this was another unfair question he couldn't possibly be expected to answer. But then he shrugged and said, "Just to look at you. I just wanted to look at you." Finney's upper lip drew back from his teeth in an unreasoned expression of disgust, and Albert visibly wilted. "I'll go."

When he opened the door, Finney sprang to his feet and began to scream help. Al stumbled over the door jamb in his haste to back out and almost fell, then slammed the door.

Finney stood in the center of the room, sides heaving for breath. He had never really imagined he could get past Albert and out the door – it was too far away – had only wanted to test his reaction time.

Fatty was even slower than he thought. He was slow, and there was someone else in the house, someone upstairs. Almost against his will, Finney felt a building sense of charge, a nervous excitement that was almost like hope.

For the rest of the day, and all that night, Finney was alone.



7.

When the cramps came again, late on his third day in the basement, he had to sit down on the striped mattress to wait for them to pass. It was like someone had thrust a spit through his side, and was turning it slowly. He ground his back teeth until he tasted blood.

Later, Finney drank out of the tank on the back of the toilet, and then stayed there, on his knees, to investigate the bolts and the pipes. He didn't know why he hadn't thought of the toilet before. He worked until his hands were raw and abraded, trying to unscrew a thick iron nut, three inches in diameter, but it was caked with rust, and he couldn't budge it.

He lurched awake, the light coming through the window on the west side of the room, falling in a beam of bright yellow sunshine filled with scintillating mica-flecks of dust. It alarmed him that he couldn't remember lying down on the mattress to nap. It was hard to piece thoughts together, to reason things through. Even after he had been awake for ten minutes, he felt as if he had only just come awake, empty-headed and disorientated.

For a long time he was unable to rise, and sat with his arms wound around his chest, while the last of the light fled, and the shadows rose around him. Sometimes a fit of shivering would come over him, so fierce his teeth chattered. As cold as it was, it would be worse after dark. He didn't think he could wait out another night as cold as the last one. That was Al's plan maybe. To starve and freeze the fight out of him. Or maybe there was no plan, maybe the fat man had keeled over of a heart attack, and this was just how Finney was going to die, one cold minute at a time. The phone was breathing again. Finney stared at it, watching as the sides inflated, withdrew, and inflated again.

"Stop that," he said to it.

It stopped.

He walked. He had to, to stay warm. The moon rose, and for a while it lit the black phone like a bone-colored spotlight. Finney's face burned and his breath smoked, as if he were more demon than boy.

He couldn't feel his feet. They were too cold. He stomped around, trying to bring the life back into them. He flexed his hands. His fingers were cold too, stiff and painful to move. He heard off-key singing and realized it was him. Time and thought were coming in leaps and pulses. He fell over something on the floor, then went back, feeling around with both hands, trying to figure out what had tripped him up, if it was something he could use as a weapon. He couldn't find anything and finally had to admit to himself he had tripped over his own feet. He put his head on the cement and shut his eyes.

He woke to the sound of the phone ringing again. He sat up, and looked across the room at it. The eastern-facing window was a pale, silvery shade of blue. He was trying to decide if it had really rung, or if he had only dreamed it ringing, when it rang once more, a loud, metallic clashing.

Finney rose, then waited for the floor to stop heaving underfoot; it was like standing on a waterbed. The phone rang a third time, the clapper clashing at the bells. The abrasive reality of the sound had the effect of sweeping his head clear, returning him to himself.

He picked up the receiver and put his ear to it.

"Hello?" he asked.

He heard the snowy hiss of static.

"John," said the boy on the other end. The connection was so poor, the call might have been coming from the other side of the world. "Listen John. It's going to be today."

"Who is this?"

"I don't remember my name," the boy said. "It's the first thing you lose."

"First thing you lose when?"

"You know when."

But Finney thought he recognized the voice, even though they had only spoken to each other that one time. "Bruce? Bruce Yamada?"

"Who knows," the boy said. "Tell me if it matters."

Finney lifted his eyes to the black wire traveling up the wall, stared at the spot where it ended in a spray of copper needles. He decided it didn't matter.

"What's going to be today?" Finney asked.

"I was calling to say he left you a way to fight him."

"What way?"

"You're holding it."

Finney turned his head, looked at the receiver in his hand. From the earpiece, which was no longer against his ear, he heard the faraway hiss of static and the tinny sound of the dead boy saying something else.

"What?" Finney asked, putting the receiver to his ear once more.

"Sand," Bruce Yamada told him. "Make it heavier. It isn't heavy enough. Do you understand?"

"Did the phone ring for any of the other kids?"

"Ask not for whom the phone rings," Bruce said, and there came soft, childish laughter. Then he said, "None of us heard it. It rang, but none of us heard. Just you. A person has to stay here a while, before you learn how to hear it. You're the only one to last this long. He killed the other children before they recovered, but he can't kill you, can't even come downstairs. His brother sits up all night in the living room making phone calls. His brother is a coke-head who never sleeps. Albert hates it but he can't make him leave."

"Bruce? Are you really there or am I losing my mind?"

"Albert hears the phone too," Bruce replied, continuing as if Finney had said nothing. "Sometimes when he's down in the basement we prank call him."

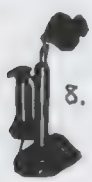
"I feel weak all the time and I don't know if I can fight him the way I feel."

"You will. You'll be dirty. I'm glad it's you. You know, she really found the balloons, John. Susannah did."

"She did?"

"Ask her when you get home."

There was a click. Finney waited for a dial tone, but there was none.



8.

A wheat-colored light had begun to puddle into the room when Finney heard the familiar slam of the bolt. His back was to the door, he was kneeling in the corner of the room, at the place where the cement had been shattered to show the sandy earth beneath. Finney still had the bitter taste of old copper in his mouth, a flavor like the bad aftertaste of grape soda. He turned his head but didn't rise, shielding what was in his hands with his body.

He was so startled to see someone besides Albert, he cried out, sprang unsteadily to his feet. The man in the doorway was small, and although his face was round and plump, the rest of his body was too tiny for his clothes: a rumpled army jacket, a loose, cable-knit sweater. His unkempt hair was retreating from the egg-shaped curve of his forehead. One corner of his mouth turned up in a wry, disbelieving smile.

"Holy shit," said Albert's brother. "I knew he had something he didn't want me to see in the basement but I mean holy shit."

Finney staggered toward him, and words came spilling out in an incoherent, desperate jumble, like people who have been stuck for a night in an elevator, finally set free. "Please – my mom – help – call help – call my sister – "

"Don't worry. He's gone. He had to run into work," said the brother. "Now I know why he was freaking out about getting called in. He was worried I'd find you while he's out."

Albert stepped into the light behind him with a hatchet, and lifted it up, cocked it like a baseball bat over one shoulder. Albert's brother went on, "Hey, do you want to know the story how I found you?"

"No," Finney said. "No, no, no."

Albert's brother made a face. "Sure. Whatever. I'll tell you some other time. Christ, calm down. Everything's okay now."

Albert brought the hatchet down into the back of his younger brother's skull with a hard, wet clunk. The force of the impact threw blood into Al's face. The brother toppled forward. The ax stayed in his head, and Albert's hands stayed on the handle. As the brother fell, he pulled Al over with him.

Albert hit the basement floor on his knees, drew a sharp breath through clenched teeth. The ax-handle slipped out of his hands and his brother fell onto his face with a heavy boneless thump. Albert grimaced, then let out a strangled cry, staring at his brother with the ax in him.

Finney stood a yard away, breathing shallowly, holding the receiver to his chest in one hand. In the other hand was a coil of black wire, the wire that had connected the receiver to the black phone. It had been necessary to chew through it to pull it off. The wire itself was straight, not curly, like on a modern phone. He had the line wrapped three times around his right hand.

"You see this," Albert said, his voice choked, uneven. He looked up. "You see what you made me do?" Then he saw what Finney was holding, and his brow knotted with confusion. "What the fuck you do to the phone?"

Finney stepped toward him and snapped the receiver into his face, across Al's nose. He had unscrewed the mouthpiece and filled the mostly hollow receiver with sand, and screwed the mouthpiece back in to hold it all in place. It hit Albert's nose with a brittle snap like plastic breaking, only it wasn't plastic breaking. The fat man made a sound, a choked cry, and blood blurted from his nostrils. He lifted a hand. Finney smashed the receiver down and crushed his fingers.

Albert dropped his shattered hand and looked up, an animal sound rising in his throat. Finney hit him again to shut him up, clubbed the receiver against the bare curve of his skull. It hit with a satisfying knocking sound and a spray of glittering sand leaped into the sunlight. Screaming, the fat man propelled himself off the floor, staggering forward, but Finney skipped back – so much faster than Albert – striking him across the mouth, hard enough to turn his head halfway around, then in the knee to drop him, to make him stop.

Al fell, throwing his arms out, caught Finney at the waist and slammed him to the floor. He came down on top of Finney's legs. Finney struggled to pull himself out from under. The fat man lifted his head, blood drizzling from his mouth, a furious moan rising from somewhere deep in his chest. Finney still held the receiver in one hand, and three loops of black wire in the other. He sat up, meant to club Albert with the receiver again, but then his hands did something else instead. He put the wire around the fat man's throat, and pulled tight, crossing his wrists behind Al's neck. Albert got a hand on his face and scratched him, flaying Finney's right cheek. Finney pulled the wire a notch tighter and Al's tongue popped out of his mouth.

Across the room, the black phone rang. The fat man choked. He stopped scratching at Finney's face and set his fingers under the wire around his throat. He could only use his left hand, because the fingers of his right were shattered, bent in unlikely directions. The phone rang again. The fat man's gaze flicked toward it, then back to Finney's face. Albert's pupils were very wide, so wide the golden ring of his irises had shrunk to almost nothing. His pupils were a pair of black balloons, obscuring twin suns. The phone rang and rang. Finney pulled at the wire. On Albert's dark, bruise colored face, was a horrified question.

"It's for you," Finney told him.

You can read 'the missing chapter' of 'The Black Phone' at Joe Hill's website, www.joehillfiction.com, where you will also find a heap of other curious content. You can also share your thoughts about this story with Joe on his message board at www.ttapress.com/discus.

illustrated by robert dunn.

The Eye was about a different kind of loss – of sight (the symptoms of which closely resemble the stages of grief over a person)

The Eye

I've been thinking about it. Death is tough. Or, as the comedy writer said on his deathbed, 'No, death is *easy*, *comedy* is hard.' And ghost stories are a bugger. I'm in the middle of writing a series of four one-hour dramas for ITV called *Afterlife*, so examining what makes ghost stories work (and not work) on film is something that's been preoccupying me of late.

From the outset, the first headache for a writer is screen time. Whilst there are hundreds of memorable short stories in the genre, like *The Ash Tree* and *O Whistle and I'll come to You, My Lad*, there are many fewer novels and full-length features. That's because ghost stories are basically anecdotal in nature. Just as ghosts are a rare occurrence in real life, they're best seen as a brief occurrence in the life of fictional characters, often a single incident. And as length expands, for a movie, believability stretches too.

Then there are the core dramatic questions. Who sees the ghost and why? What does the ghost *want*? How do you kill or get rid of something dead? How (in Hollywood) to give the hero a Redemptive Character Arc, and still keep the ending scary? (Thank you, *Sixth Sense*.)

The merciless photo-literalism of film does the writer no favours either. As some textbook or other said, there are no metaphors on celluloid: a tree is a tree. Which is fine until you are trying to depict on screen something which is essentially a subjective experience. And has never been photographed in reality (Victorian spirit photos excluded).

So the crucial decisions are how to show the ghost, and when.

A rubber-suited man was edited into Jacques Tourneur's otherwise psychologically-driven *Night of the Demon* by a nervous producer who wanted a monster movie. Hands up who thinks it would have been better if you never saw the demon? The gamble is, if you show nothing till the last reel, you risk making the audience restless, or downright bored. *The Haunting* (1963) gets round this by showing almost nothing and doing 99% of the work with sound. And *The Innocents* achieves it, exquisitely, by showing its ghosts little by little, indistinctly across a lake, glimpsed fleetingly in a corridor, hazily back-lit atop a tower or vaguely through a window-pane at night. These devices are valuable because to let the eye rest on a ghost too long diminishes its unearthly power. The Unheimlich becomes Heimlich, as Freud would say; the unfamiliar becomes familiar, and therefore safe.

Thanks to Truman Capote and John Mortimer's screenplay, *The Innocents* is a note-perfect movie. Adapted from 'The Turn of the Screw' by Henry James, it's a film about sexual repression, and who better than a gay man from the Deep South to write about sexual repression? And Jack Clayton's every directorial decision adds layers to that theme. The house visually echoes the church upbringing of the governess, whilst nature runs rampant in the garden, its creepy-crawliness symbolising our baser instincts if left uncontrolled.

This black-and-white classic is regarded by many as the gold standard of ghost films because every beat can equally be justified on a psychological as well as supernatural level. Both interpretations are given equal weight right to the last frame. The governess is having to choose between two mutually exclusive options: *is the world normal, in which case I'm mad, or do ghosts really exist?* This creates a deeper level of intensity and integrity because, I think, it mirrors what would be our own real-life reaction to a supernatural experience; not plain acceptance, but a vacillation between denial and belief.

The Innocents is also instructive about character. It may seem obvious, but I've come to learn that when you're trying to work out a ghost story script, often the ghost represents the flaw, or something lacking, in the protagonist. This is sometimes the key to working out the through-line of a script, and points you in the direction of a suitable ending, if you're lucky.

In other words, ghosts are essentially the character's interior life, externalised. Otherwise all you have is a ghost train ride.

Six Feet Under does it (though Alan Ball would say they're not ghosts) and *Edge of Darkness* did it with Bob Peck's daughter. Though *The Eye* was about a different kind of loss – of sight (the symptoms of which closely resemble the stages of grief over a person).

Also I believe for ghost stories to work on screen, they must have a baseline of normality. Case in point, even though *The Haunting* (1963) was set in a big old brooding house, the director was quick to set up a small but important 'breakfast scene' to ground us in domesticity. It reminds us of reality.

GHOST STORIES

The same can't be said of the Jan de Bont remake, with its bloatedly huge sets, Playstation dramaturgy, and dreamy CGI cupids. The trouble with ghosts conveyed by SFX in general or CGI in particular is that they take you out of the moment. In this most fragile of genres, if the audience reacts 'How did they do that?' even for a split second, you're lost. And let's face it, all the CGI in the world will not buy you the eerie frisson of those open kitchen cabinets in *The Sixth Sense*.

But my biggest bugbear in ghost movies is the tendency for them to regress into detective stories. *Stir of Echoes* was pretty frightening, until the murder mystery took over. Ditto *What Lies Beneath*, which had the double whammy of boring detective story and a gossamer-floaty CGI wraith, adding insult to injury. Even the groundbreaking *Ringu* was diminished by becoming a 'find the body, solve the crime' Nancy Drew mystery in the third act. And the BBC's recent paranormal TV series *Sea of Souls* so blatantly painted itself into conventional 'detective story' that in two separate stories a character said, 'Why are we doing this? We're not the police.' Exactly!

I'm convinced that ghost stories and detective stories actually appeal to two different parts of the brain. The ghost story appeals to our love of mystery and the irrational, the detective story to our need for logical solutions. So not only are they no help to each other, they're actually antithetical in their aims.

One director who knows we take pleasure in the irrational is David Lynch. What, if not a ghost, is the Mystery Man from *Lost Highway*? Or the singer in *Mulholland Drive* who dies on stage but her voice lives on?

Kubrick tapped into the inexplicable in his adaptation of *The Shining*, bravely jettisoning much of King's best-selling ideas for his own subtler evocation of stress and dread. Not for him glimpsed or shadowy ghosts, but ghosts in full view, ghosts that won't go away, brightly lit ghosts not from shadow-laden Expressionism, but from Surrealism and the un-pin-downable unconscious. For reference he cherry-picked the photographs of Diane Arbus: not only the famous Identical Twins but also her 'Masked Man at a Ball'. Interestingly, Arbus wrote in her diary that anxiety was 'the fear of being afraid' and going to horror movies was about 'finding out that what you feared wasn't so bad'. Except in *The Shining*, it was.

I wish the MTV generation of directors would learn from Kubrick, and Polanski, that fast cutting might make a film more thrilling, but it doesn't make it more scary. The reverse. If you constantly have something new to look at, you can't feel unease, in fact you feel comfortable, because the camera is always cutting away. On the other hand, long takes make the palms sweat because there is nowhere for the eyes to run. As William Friedkin once said to me, the scariest shot in the world is 'a long slow track towards a closed door'.

Nowadays, optimistically, understatement is having a comeback. *Dark Water* was tremendous as a demonstration that less is more. Who would have thought that a big puddle on the ceiling could be so disturbing?

Dark Water was a demonstration that less is more. Who would have thought that a big puddle on the ceiling could be so disturbing?

Also, after *Blair Witch Project* (a ghost story, despite the title) hopefully we can finally bury the illusion that these kinds of movies require Happy Endings. In this genre, uniquely, doom is good. Dark is light; the light of revelation.

At their best, ghost stories can reveal great emotional and even existential truths. The French film *Under The Sand* starring Charlotte Rampling is such an achingly perfect analysis of grief, it makes *Truly Madly Deeply* look like a *Carry On* film. And Nic Roeg's magisterial *Don't Look Now* (a ghost story all but technically) is the most exact dramatisation of the battle between belief and rationalism in cinema. Its protagonist is a sceptic who refuses to acknowledge what is happening to him until it is too late. Its shocking climax says that we only learn the truth at the moment of death. The great Aha! is followed by extinction. God is a cosmic joker and we are his playthings. He fucks with our minds and then we're gone. You don't get that sort of idea on *EastEnders*, or even *West Wing*.

Ghost stories shine into the corners other genres leave safely unlit. They play with ideas others leave well alone. What we long for and simultaneously fear. That death isn't the end.

Which is why some of us are drawn to it again and again. As Diane Arbus said, 'touching the hem of the unknown. And, being me, wanting to lift it higher.'

As a screenwriter in the 'horror and affiliated genres', Stephen Volk has worked with directors such as Ken Russell, William Friedkin, Danny Boyle, Sam Raimi and Stephen Hopkins.

Dark Water

if i should wake before i die by mike o´driscoll

art by michael j. king

An hour before dawn, Lee dreamed alone in the car. Through the fogged windscreen he saw stars blinking in and out of the blue-black sky like faulty Christmas lights, and felt the cold tighten its grip on his bones. With an effort of will he wound down the window and sucked in a mouthful of freezing air. Moonlight shone on the frost-covered fields and the world seemed emptier than it had any right to be. He lit a cigarette, turned on the heating, then the radio, pre-tuned to a talk station. A man was complaining about East European prostitutes attracting unsavoury elements to his neighbourhood. Said he was embarrassed to walk his kids to school.

When the windscreen had demisted, Lee started the car and pulled out of the layby. He passed the lights of a Shell station and shortly after drove through the main street of a sleeping northern town. "They know nothing of our traditions," the man on the radio was saying. Lee saw himself staring out of the rear-view mirror, nodding. Talk-shows kept him informed about the important issues of the day. He saw no mystery in people wanting to talk to perfect strangers at five in the morning about the war or refugees or gay priests. Their voices offered as true a picture of the world as he wanted. Without them he might have remained unaware of the extent to which the country was being swamped by bogus Albanians.

The news came on. Lee flicked his cigarette out the window and wound it up. A terrorist bomb had killed twenty-eight people in a Marseilles marketplace. Interest rates were rising. A Russian oilman had been arrested. The government had failed in its promise to get tough on crime. Lee's head pulsed and his eyes kept drifting off the road. He reached into the holdall on the passenger seat and found he'd used up the last of his pro-plus. Should have stopped at the Shell station. Should have got a holdall with a logo on it, Nike for instance, or the name of a football team. He liked the idea of labels, the way they said things about you without anyone having to ask. When he was a kid he'd had a blue hoody with *Quiksilver* on it. Used to wonder what it felt like to surf. A woman's body had been found in a flat in Bedford. Police were treating her death as suspicious. House prices were continuing to fall in the south-east. A former Derby winner had died of MRSA. A teenage girl had killed herself live on the internet. Lee understood that people were affected by these things.

Lights appeared in the distance, coming towards him. He eased back on the accelerator, bringing the Astra's speed down to fifty. The lights grew brighter as they approached. He wondered if he closed his eyes, would he still drive in a straight line? Would the other driver guess that he couldn't see? He shut his eyes and began counting. At four, he felt something huge and powerful hurtling by on his right.

A woman was talking on the radio. Her voice faltered as she spoke. "They had no right," she was saying. "The things they said about me were lies." The talk-show host asked her what they had said and the woman started crying. There was no need. He pressed buttons, searching for another station. For a while he listened to a pop show and sang along with a song he recognised. He stopped when he realised that his words didn't correspond with the lyrics. He retuned to the talk-show and heard the same woman talking about all she had lost. As she listed each thing in turn, he repeated it aloud. In the mirror he saw himself nodding again.

Presently, Lee took a left onto a narrow, winding lane and followed it down into the valley. Pockets of mist settled on the fields and curled over the ditch into the lane. After quarter of a mile he pulled over on to a dirt track leading into a wood. He stopped the car, got out and stared into the fields. Amorphous shapes drowsed in the mist, dreaming animal dreams. Feeling nothing. The eastern hills were edged with pink light, though it would be a while yet before it swept down into the valley. Back in the car he wondered if the woman had said her name. Unable to recall, he edged the vehicle slowly into the trees until the low, spindly branches of Hawthorn and Mountain Ash crowded too tight around him. Insects were caught in the glare of his headlights while larger creatures flew back and forth across his field of vision. He tried to follow their flight-paths but the bats were too quick for him. The woman was having difficulty composing herself. "I feel wretched," she said.

The talk-show host said he understood.

"They never said goodbye," the woman said. "They didn't know."

Abruptly, the man went to another call. Lee wondered if the woman was aware she'd been cut off, or if her voice still carried on, speaking in dead air. He lowered the window and changed stations. A hip-hop song blared out of the speakers and something hit the windscreen. He stared through the glass and saw that it was moving. Curious, he turned off the ignition and got out of the car. The creature made feeble, squeaking noises as it tried to rise from the bonnet. One of its wings appeared to be broken. He picked it up and held it a few inches from his face. When it squirmed and tried to flap its good wing, he gripped it a little tighter. Its heart raced, a thousand beats a minute. As if trying to cram a whole lifetime into a few seconds. Opening his fist, he saw that he had crushed its lower body. Its hairless skin seemed translucent, and he wondered if the air passed right through its body. Years ago he had bought a bird for a girl who kept it in a cage. He'd forgotten the bird but now he remembered how it had groomed itself, smoothing its green and yellow feathers. The way it had perched fearlessly on his finger as he'd removed it from the cage.

More bats flitted through the air around him, as if sensing their brother's desire to fly one last time. A desire that drained it of life. After a few seconds it was still and he laid it carefully on the ground.

He got the holdall from the car. The leaves crunched beneath his feet as he trudged deeper into the wood, the dank smell of dead vegetation filling his nostrils. He couldn't remember the bird's name. Dry leaves cracked up ahead as something walked over them. Its footsteps matched his own. Not a fox or a badger. They made piglike noises, rooting around in dirt. This was different, more deliberate. It made his palms sweat. When he stopped to try and identify the sounds, he couldn't hear them at all. He moved on, clambering over fallen trees or ducking

under low, ground-scraping branches, making noise to drown out those he hadn't made.

After five minutes he leaned against a maple tree and lit a cigarette. Sweat cooled on his face as he listened, hearing nothing. The absence of sound eased his tension. Close by, a dry leaf moved. Peering intently, he saw a mouse busying itself with a piece of debris. He squatted, drew on the cigarette and saw the tiny creature more clearly in the orange glow. It seemed unperturbed by his presence. An almost human sigh drifted through the undergrowth. Like sleep-talking. When he was younger and had lived in the residential unit, some of the kids had talked in their sleep. He used to lie awake at night and listen to them. They made more sense in the dark.

The mouse was standing up on its hindfeet, looking right at him.

What does it feel like?

He turned his head slowly, looking to see where the voice had come from. He'd imagined it; his sudden unease was a trick of the wind. Except, there was no wind. He stared at the mouse, trying to fathom its purpose. Nothing was clear except his own foolishness. He took a long pull on the cigarette till its tip was glowing hot and bright, then he lowered it towards the creature's head. The mouse scuttled away before he could burn it.

Overhead, the night was losing its depth and a pale, watery light was beginning to filter into the trees. He felt a quickening sensation in his stomach as he set off again, a strange hunger that unnerved him. A sheep began bleating from one of the nearby fields. It wasn't saying anything real, but even so he wished it would shut up. Just as he wished whatever was moving through the trees to his right, would be still. Something else came behind it, making a whistling noise. His skin tingled and he fought the urge to look over his shoulder. It was a disappointment to discover that the numbness that gripped his heart worked less effectively on his brain. More bleating sounds came, closer now, inside the wood. Broken voices answered them, like voices from a badly tuned radio. They had nothing to say, no new insights to offer the world.

He pressed on through the trees until he came to a drystone wall and the garden stretching beyond. The lawn was coated with frost and half a dozen frozen dog turds glistened there like oversize jewels. At the far end of the garden stood the house with its pale walls and dark windows, solemn as a judge's stare. He leaned against the wall, wondering if it was the same dog. How old would it have been? One human year was seven for a dog, which meant it would have been over a hundred.

It was immaterial. He wasn't even sure how old Frank and Carol were now. He'd never thought much about it when he had lived with them. They were just grown-ups, people he'd lived with for a while. In the ten years he'd been away, he'd hardly given them a thought.

He unzipped the holdall. The dog's name was Buster. Some kind of terrier, white with patches of brown on his back. He took out a small package and put it inside his leather coat, then touched the other items in turn without removing them from the bag. The hammer made him think about a Christmas present Frank had given him when he was ten. A carpenter's belt complete with its own tools – screwdriver, clawhammer, a tenon saw – and pouches for nails and screws. Now you've got your own, Frank had said, maybe you'll stop messing with mine. Once, he'd used them to build a den in the woods, but that had been about the only thing he'd ever made. Mostly, he took things apart.

As dawn crawled down the valley slopes, Lee leaned against the wall, feeling enervated, like something was leeching off his numbness. Fragmented memories buzzed round his head, none of them welcome. He tried to focus on the things that really mattered, the fundamentals. Money, security, health. They were what people talked about on the radio. Everything else was gloss. Losing sight of that was the road to hurt. If he ever had kids, that's the first thing he would tell them. Like Frank and Carol should have told him.

Ten days since he had slept in his own bed. Hard to imagine it now, the other side cold and empty. He lit a cigarette and smoked it hurriedly, afraid the nicotine would choke that train of thought. His intentions were still inchoate but he sensed that time was slipping away from him. Soon, he would have to flesh them out, not only for himself but so that they too would understand.

For a while he sat and stared into the trees, aware of the quiet. He felt weightless, and imagined himself made of mist, drifting up above the world. Voices were like that, which made them easier to relate to than the people whose mouths they escaped from.

A dog barked suddenly. A light had come on upstairs. A minute later, the kitchen light came on and the backdoor opened. A dog ran out into the garden and Frank appeared in the doorway, in shorts and a T-shirt. He yawned and stretched while the dog squatted and pissed on the lawn. Not Buster, but some German Shepherd he didn't recognise. People replaced things too easily. He'd never thought much about what might have happened after he'd left, but now he couldn't stop. He imagined another kid moving into the house, sleeping in his bed. The thought festered, reminding him why he had learned not to feel. After Frank and Carol, if somebody hurt him, he always said it was all right.

The dog was running towards the wood. Lee grabbed the holdall and scrambled a little further back into the trees. He heard her sniffing at the other side of the wall and then she growled. He took the hammer out and put his hand around the cold steel head, trying to draw its hardness into himself. Frank's footsteps sounded noisily on the lawn and a low snarl came from deeper in the wood. The German Shepherd yelped and retreated. Lee rose slowly and peered over the wall. Frank was halfway down the garden, the dog at his side. He patted her head and made soothing noises as he gazed into the trees, frowning.

Lee felt a stab of anger. For some reason he'd imagined Frank would be little changed, but although he was clearly recognisable as the same man, he was also different. As if something had been altered inside him, some small but essential thing that had defined him as Frank. It didn't matter. It changed nothing.

Frank turned and walked back to the house, the dog following him. An impostor. Grabbing the holdall, Lee moved through the trees to the eastern corner of the garden. He climbed over the stone wall and made for a small shed about thirty yards up from the trees. Its creosoted walls were dusted with frost which cooled his cheek as he pressed against it. The sudden crunching of grass startled him, and before he could squeeze into the space between the wall and the shed, a sheep ran past towards the wood, with something brown and white snapping at its heels. The sheep scrambled up and over the wall. As the dog clambered up after it, a young boy raced into view, waving a stick and urging the dog on. Lee felt a sudden burst of excitement in his chest and made to follow them, but before he had taken half a dozen steps, all three had vanished into the woods. He stopped in the middle of the lawn, confused.

Feelings belonged to memory and the less time you spent thinking about the past, the less chance there was of old pains rising to the surface. The boy reminded him of his friend, Robert. Most evenings after school they had played in the woods but it was one time he was remembering now, almost

their last time together. He had felt that someone had seen them coming out of the wood, had known somehow, what they had done. The sheep had gone in there of its own accord. They'd just stumbled across it, tangled in thick undergrowth. It was an opportunity, he'd told Robert. Robert's face had been uncomprehending as he'd explained about the test. How to find out what an animal was capable of feeling, if what they felt was different from people. Robert, reluctantly helping him hold the sheep as Buster barked with excitement, wincing as Lee had smashed the hammer against its head. The sound of splintering bone and having to force Robert to take the hammer, to finish the job. Insisting that their friendship depended on it. It had taken three more blows for him to do it and afterwards, he'd stood there slack-jawed and silent. It meant they were brothers, Lee said. It meant they would never let each other down.

Except he'd seen the shock written all over Robert's face, and he'd known that the woman who'd seen them come out on the far side of the wood, away from Frank's house, had seen it too. Already he'd understood the extent to which your feelings could betray the things you'd done, and though he'd been able to still his own emotions, Robert's haunted face had signalled their guilt to her.

He trudged back to the shed and crouched there, shivering. Crows were cawing in the woods, a harsh noise that grated on his nerves. He wrapped his arms round his body, more to hold himself together than to keep out the cold. It had been inside him ever since those long, lonely nights of laying awake so as not to have to dream. If you thought about the things that scared you instead of dreaming them, they became less real. Not darkness or demons, not ghosts or vampires, but people. Their absence. Not being where you expected them to be. After endless hours of sleeplessness, birds would signal the dawn and he'd go quietly to their room and sit on the edge of their bed while they slept. The radio-alarm was his cue to start talking, trying to explain about vanishing people. Ssshhh, Frank would say, making a space for him to lay down. Listen to what they're saying. He would do that, and though he didn't understand, it was the sound of the voices that had held him, the inflections of emotion, the intimations of how life might turn out, all heard in a warm half-light, the kind of dream he wanted to have.

He took the package from his coat, opened it and pulled out a set of photographs. It wasn't the first time he'd looked at the pictures, but no matter how often he'd studied them, he still couldn't understand what they were trying to tell him. They seemed unrelated, a series of random snapshots rather than the cohesive narrative he had anticipated.

Pillars of mist rose up from the trees, making it seem as if the woods were on fire. Two gulls soared overhead, riding on the sun's first rays. A voice told Lee he was not asleep, that he was not empty. Light sparkled off the strands of a web strung between the wall and the shed. Thoughts oscillated inside his brain, making it hard to stay focused. A spider hung there. He wondered how it perceived him. The pictures made him angry. It wasn't real anger, just the memory of being angry. He didn't understand why he was remembering feeling. The spider crawled towards the top of the web. He put the pictures back inside his coat and leaned closer till his face was just inches from the strands of silk.

It was the photographs talking to him, making him feel. He straightened a forefinger and touched the web, letting the spider crawl onto his hand. Waking you to pain. He turned it palm upwards and the spider moved boldly into the creased flesh. He couldn't describe it. Some kind of sadness. He closed his fist on the spider and realised that he had been holding his breath. He let it out slowly, through his mouth, surprised at how long it took to empty his lungs. Indefinable anxieties sapped his will. He was no longer sure why he had come here, felt uncertain about what he was supposed to do next.

He unwound his fingers and the spider descended from his hand like a parachutist. It landed on the bottom plank of the shed and crawled underneath. Did it see itself as alone? Did it hurt when its legs were pulled off? A weight had settled on his brain, crowding the grand emptiness with useless thoughts. There were things he would have changed, but how, he couldn't say. Maybe he would have come back here earlier. Start with Frank and Carol, not have to go any further. Not have to feel what the woman on the radio felt.

The thoughts belonged to someone else. He rubbed his eyes and squinted at something laying on the lawn. Fingers of ice scratched at his back, driving the cold deep inside him. He tried to move but his limbs did not respond. The body of a young boy. Buster appeared, moving hesitantly towards the motionless form. The dog sniffed the boy's face and licked the too white flesh. It was Robert, he saw, feeling a wave of strange emotions crash over him.

Buster raised his head and looked at Lee. You killed him.

Lee shook his head. It wasn't true.

He couldn't stand it. What you made him do.

Lee thought about the sheep and the woman who had seen them coming out of the woods. What was her name? Shouldn't have made him do it. Tell by his face he didn't want to. But it was a test, a test to prove he had the guts. The sheep was as good as dead anyway.

Music distracted him and with it, Frank's voice singing along. Prince? Michael Jackson? He could never remember whose song it was. Only that Frank would always join in despite the fact that he couldn't sing for shit. Robert was scared when Lee told him to keep his mouth shut. It was just a dumb animal, while the test was a bond between them. The woman had asked questions, wanting to know what they got up to in the woods. She needed a warning, Lee explained, something to make her understand to keep her questions to herself. He'd told Robert about her cat, explained that it could be a test of loyalty.

You made him do it, the dog said. He did this for you.

No, not for me. To shut her up.

Buster laid his head on the dead boy's chest.

Here boy, Lee called. Good dog. Buster ignored him and closed its eyes. Lee felt he was on the verge of disintegrating. He picked up the holdall and set off in the shadow of the wall. As he neared the house, the music faded and he caught snatches of a news programme from the kitchen. He crouched beneath the window and tried to focus on the voice as a way of shutting out what he was feeling. The government was to face a confidence vote. A famous actor had committed suicide following the diagnosis of a rare skin disease. Police were linking the death of a woman in Bedford to the murder of Grace Lehane whose body had been discovered eight days ago in Bristol. A new type of star had been discovered at the edge of the Milky Way. A religious leader said it marked the beginning of the end of the world.

Lee wondered how anyone could tell. It made sense to think that for everything new that appeared in the sky, something had disappeared from somewhere else. His fingers losing their

sense of touch meant some other part of him was feeling too acutely. He cradled one fist in the other and blew into them. He worried about frostbite and wondered if he was becoming irrational, letting emotions get the better of him. He listened to the radio, yearning for the comfort of other tragedies.

A shadow moved across the splintered light at the edge of the wood, something swaying in the November breeze. Small tremors ran through Lee's body as he tried to deny what he was seeing. Buster hanging from the branch of a Hawthorn tree, his tongue lolling out between his teeth, longer than it had been when he was alive. He didn't do it. If he said it often enough it would be true. He could believe that. Like he believed Lizzie's death was nothing to do with him. Except for the bird. He'd bought it for her when they'd lived in the residential unit. She was his girlfriend. A budgie. What was its name? Cost ten pounds, and the cage was extra. He'd gone to the unit after he'd left Frank and Carol. Lizzie came later, when they were both fourteen. They were in love and had sex all the time. Fucked like rabbits until she'd dumped him for some older boy. Watching the bird preen in its cage. Whistling to it, knowing that it trusted him. A test. He remembered coaxing it out of the cage. Squeezing the life out of it. Leaving its broken body on Lizzie's bed.

How old had Buster been? Seven dog years to one human. He'd fought hard and Lee had cried. Only time in his life. Lizzie's new boyfriend had attacked him the next day but Lee had a knife. Stabbed the fucker in the thigh. Lizzie's shrill screams reminded him of the bird. It was good to be able to translate, to render things abstract. Lizzie's fright was a bird. Not the first time, but two nights ago. The first time it was the the boyfriend who was altered, his blood becoming the sky at dusk. They sent him to a young offenders' institute and that became home. No different really to Frank and Carol's place.

What appeared to be one thing was quite often something else entirely. When you made things abstract it meant they couldn't hurt you. He could look at the photographs and not feel anything because they were just representations. As long as he didn't walk into the house, the voices he was hearing might just as well have come from the radio as out of the mouths of Frank or Carol. It was no trouble turning off a radio.

He peered over the sill and saw them sitting at the table. Carol looked older, in her red towelling robe and moccasins. Maybe it was because she hadn't yet brushed the randomness of sleep out of her dark hair or maybe the dreams etched into her face were not those she would have chosen. The same sense of disappointment seemed to have touched Frank, painting lines of grey in his sideburns and stealing the spark from his eyes. Lee tried to remember them the way they had been, and what they had meant to him. He felt weak, as if his resolve were dissipating in the November chill. After three years, why had they sent him away? If they had loved him, why hadn't they stuck by him, instead of packing him off like faulty goods? If they hadn't done that Buster might still be alive instead of hanging from a tree at the bottom of their garden. The hurt was theirs. He'd told them it was okay, he was all right. It meant nothing.

Carol smiled across the table. The kind of smile that didn't go anywhere. Frank was nodding in time to a song on the radio, something old that Lee half recognised. Dexy's Midnight something? He gave a piece of toast to the dog sitting at his side.

Carol frowned. You always do that, she said. No matter how many times I say.

Does no harm, Frank said.

She shook her head. It encourages bad habits.

You can't encourage something unless it's already there.

They used to say the same things about Buster. Frank petted the dog and Carol watched him. Lee wondered if they ever thought about Buster. Her gaze drifted slightly and focused on Lee. Her eyes seemed to come to life through the glass, and she smiled again. Lee felt a muted ache in his chest. It was only when you let people get close to you that you felt this way. In pain. You thought being close to someone was about trusting them but in reality it was about them discovering your weaknesses, finding out how to make you hurt. First, they make you love them, then they tear you apart. Do they even remember who you were?

He squatted, his back against the wall. The sun had edged up over the trees, making his eyes water. Unfamiliar emotions had filled the emptiness inside him. It had been a mistake to return. He took out the photographs again and looked through them, hoping they would make sense to him now. The duct tape over Lizzie's mouth, hiding lips that would never kiss again. The stillness in her eyes which signalled the realisation that his face was the last she would ever see. In Bedford, everything had been much clearer, what he had to do, his reasons for doing it. Afterwards, when he had taken the pictures, he'd felt no doubts. He'd understood that it had been wrong to kill the bird. But she had betrayed him, just as Frank and Carol had done ten years ago. He'd done Buster because it was the only way he'd known how to make them feel what he was feeling.

If Grace hadn't walked out on him ten days ago he might never have woken up to the truth. How love was simply the abstract of pain. The thought of it sickened him. Laying himself bare so she could stab him in the heart and then the excuses – that he didn't know how to trust, that he had too much anger inside him, that he was afraid to let people get close. If that were true, if he'd stopped her getting close, then how was it she'd caused him so much pain? He'd tried to make her see the necessity of distance; all along he had believed himself capable of maintaining it. Before it happened, if someone had said to him that she would walk away, he would have felt indifferent, unaffected, able to carry on. But it had cut deep into him, exposing his weakness, his self-delusion.

Calm settled on him as he looked through the pictures, finding a kind of peace in their stillness. The purple bruises around Grace's throat, the trickle of blood on her chin, from where she had bit her tongue. Even before he had tracked her to Bristol, he had known what he had to do to kill the pain. If she had had a dog or a cat or a bird, he would have left it unharmed. Now, staring at her dead eyes, eyes that could no longer betray him, he felt he could finally trust her.

There was a purity in his feelings towards both women, an acceptance of what they were, what they had represented. He thought about Frank and Carol, tried to imagine feeling the same towards them and realised how much he wanted it to be. He laid six photographs on the path. Another two he rested on the sill above his head. His body felt lighter, as if the burden of feeling had been lifted. He crept towards the kitchen door and placed another eight pictures on the step, arranging them in two neat rows.

People were talking on the radio inside the house. He heard Frank and Carol's voices, as if they too were speaking on the radio, offering their opinions on the war, on refugees, on the dispossessed. He imagined that they were speaking for his benefit, that they were no longer abstract but knew that he was still somewhere out in the world, listening to what they had to say. Perhaps they sensed how close he was.

He took the hammer and duct tape from the holdall, and started to rise. The sense of weightlessness empowered him, made him aware of how little he felt. As he reached for the door handle, someone called his name. Turning, he caught a glimpse of movement at the bottom of the garden. He shielded

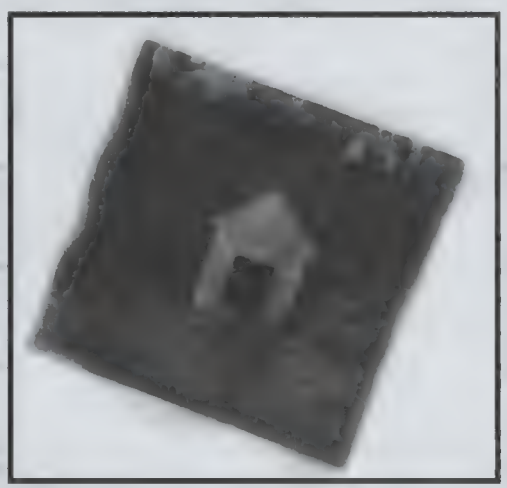
his eyes against the sunlight, saw strands of vapour rising from the grass, and through them, a young boy standing at the edge of the wood. His heart lurched, then began beating faster as he recognised the clothes, the blue, hooded sweatshirt with the Quiksilver logo, the baggy jeans, the Adidas trainers. Buster waited at the boy's side, anticipating some new adventure.

The boy beckoned. Lee felt a tremor of excitement and then a slow crumbling of emptiness. He put down the hammer and tape and searched through the remaining pictures, shaking, aware of a growing sense of urgency. In the one he wanted, Grace smiled out of the frame, the sunlight seeming to set her straw-coloured hair ablaze. Her eyes seemed to hold the key to some unrevealed secret. He stood beside her in the picture, one tentative arm around her waist, half-smiling, as if caught between the desire to know and the comfort of unknowing. He wished he had had the guts to ask her what the secret was. How it really felt.

He slid the picture under the door, left the others on the step and turned back towards the wood. The grass sparkled and crunched beneath his feet as he made his way down the garden. His heart thumped painfully, as if trying to beat its way out of his chest. The boy's fingers were cold as the earth as he took hold of Lee's hand. A sudden fear touched him, yet he went with the boy, as if compelled to follow his body in consummating a union he didn't yet comprehend.

It's all right, the boy said. It's okay.

Diffuse sunlight brushed the low spindly branches and was swallowed in pools of darkness. Something scraped against Lee's face and drew blood across his cheek. Thin shadows chased each other back and forth across their path. He tripped on a root and sprawled in dank leaves, biting his tongue to silence his fear. As he tried to get up his hands sank into a wet, yielding warmth. He scrabbled back from the animal remains, not wanting to see what it had been. He stifled a sob as he tried to wipe the blood and slime from his arms against a tree trunk, but the stink of decay burned in his nostrils. He hugged the tree to steady himself, pressing his face against the rough bark. Sweat stung his eyes but failed to wash away the memories of things he had done to stop himself from feeling. Denying reality. Saying it was all right whenever he was hurting. The bark softened a little against his face and grazed his skin. He pulled back instinctively and saw a small tongue withdrawing into rough puckered lips, a drop of blood from his cheek glistening on it.



I felt this way, the boy said, crouching beside him. He looked older than he did just a few moments ago. His blank expression was a reminder of Lee's lost emptiness. If he *had* killed them, what would be different now? If Grace or Lizzie were alive, would his pain be any more real? He wondered if it was possible to feel anything other than fear.

The boy yanked on his arm . Come on, he said, pulling him deeper into the wood where soft noises oozed from the earth like dead creatures' prayers. He tried to imagine what they were feeling. It wasn't at all like he thought it would be, the sharp tang of dread and the quick, intense moment of pain, uncomplicated by any kind of anger or hate. They detached themselves from the trees and stepped out of the shadows. He caught glimpses of his own face, sometimes feathered, sometimes furred. He thought about what he had been and what he was becoming, surprised at the strength of his fear. Even so, he wanted to feel more.

Lizzie stepped out from the hollow of a tree and he felt a stabbing sensation in his heart. She was fourteen again, but the silver tape over her mouth was much more recent. I'm sorry, he said. What I did to you.

She nodded, reached up and pulled the tape away. Opening her mouth, she stuck her fingers inside and pulled out a bird. She put it on his head and as it gripped him, he felt all the terror and pain she had felt in her last moments. His flesh coarsened and split as the past crawled out of him. Memories and their attendant emotions flowed through his mind and, seeing her smile, he accepted that she had the right to do this.

She urged him on, past everything he had tested. They were whole again and no longer afraid. Robert too, welcomed him into the wood, handing him the cat they had killed. Its touch burned him but he held onto it, feeling its heart begin to beat and seeing the livid rope marks fade from Robert's neck. There were a dozen or more kids walking beside him through the trees, mostly boys, and though he could hardly bring himself to look, he knew they all carried a piece of his hurt. He thought he knew what was coming and tried to ready himself for it, but even so, seeing Grace laid in a shallow grave still shocked him. Her body was pale and bruised, her tongue swollen and protruding from between her blackened lips.

Touch her, the boy said. Feel what you made her feel.

He didn't think he could but as he stared at her unmoving form, he was overwhelmed with pity and remorse. She was beautiful still, in spite of what he had done to her. He knelt and raised her head in his hands. I'm so sorry, he said. I'm so fucking sorry. It didn't seem enough but he didn't know what else to say. He was appalled at the tears that filled his eyes but had no power to stop them. Grace moved beneath him and he shuddered as her cold fingers touched his cheek, transmitting her feelings to him. Don't, he said, before she gave him back the fragments of a humanness that allowed him to see what he had lost when he had driven her away. How much she'd loved him, and how crazy he'd been to fear what he'd felt for her.

I take it all back, he told her. Grace smiled but there was no life in her eyes. Its absence mirrored his own awful emptiness. He'd finally gotten what he'd always striven for, he realised, but it wasn't what he wanted anymore.

He turned back to the others. It was difficult to move, even harder to speak. The tear that strayed onto his cheek was a tiny glacier. I'm afraid, he said in a brittle voice.

Grace put her arms around him, the coldness of her embrace penetrating deep into his flesh, freezing his still beating heart. In a moment she let him go and started to move away.

He called her name as she drifted towards a part of the woods he didn't know. She turned and glanced back at him, a soundless question on her lips.

Loud enough for her to hear, he said, I'm not all right.

Grace said, You will be, and left him alone with himself.

Mike's stories have appeared in previous issues of TTA, as well as *Interzone*, *Nemonymous*, and *Albedo One*. Recent fiction has appeared in the anthologies *Gathering the Bones* and *The Dark*. His story from the latter, 'The Silence of the Falling Stars', will be reprinted in the latest editions of *Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* and *The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror*.

Christopher Fowler must have covered this story in grease before putting it down on paper because it shoots off from the start, with a flowing prose, that slides you smoothly into the bizarre events at SymaxCorp. Which means that the title becomes a reminder to the reader lest they get so immersed in the story that they forget to do just that, *Breathe*.

Ben Harper arrives in his new job at SymaxCorp with a promise to himself that he'll keep his mouth shut and toe the company line this time. Desperate for work, he's obtained his job as Health and Safety manager on a vastly exaggerated CV and he really should have figured out how to switch a computer on before he arrived. Fortunately, he's helped through his first day by Miranda. She also shows him some of the building's more unusual features – pigeons that drop dead when they approach the windows, hordes of insects in the wiring and PC monitors that broadcast radio stations that went off the air decades ago. Helped by Miranda and her friends, June and Meera, Ben starts asking awkward questions about the mysterious room 3014 and the strange disappearance of his predecessor, whose car is still in the company car park. But does he really want to know the answers?

Breathe contains many of the themes that can be found in Fowler's vast collection of short stories. His black humour is on fine form in his examination of corporate attitudes towards their workforce and it generates a number of laugh out loud moments as he executes some fine *Dilbert*-esque observations.

Fowler's favourite urban settings are here too, with SymaxCorp being based in London, on a curve in the river. He captures the impersonal hardness of the building's design and even the misguided attempts to create real tranquillity using fake trees. Also lurking here are other regulars – there's a religious fanatic taking his zeal to extremes and some scathing political comment being used as an effective punch-line to the whole story.

The use of the present tense in *Breathe* is unusual for a Fowler story, but the cinematic style is even rarer. The combination of these two modes is a bit difficult to get used to at the start. It creates quite a distancing effect for the reader, but happily this wears off with the arrival of the main characters and is less obvious for the rest of the novella.

What's missing from the story is the history that Fowler usually brings to his characters. Apart from Ben Harper, the rest of the characters are slightly shallow, more like caricatures really, with their main features enlarged to eclipse the lesser ones: June is basically obese; Meera in her sari, is just a martial art practitioner.

It's easy to see how more character background would have broken the fast pace of *Breathe* though. As it is, the story just zips along on Fowler's streamlined prose in a fun, *Dilbert* meets Zombies romp.

SA: According to your article, on the Telos.co.uk website, *Breathe* developed from three different directions: some research done for short stories, the idea for a movie, and a desire to write simply and directly again. What research did you do that helped to inspire *Breathe*?

CF: I went to the top of Canary Wharf's Number One Canada Square and got a feel for the place, and I read up a lot on Japanese 'smart' buildings. I also did some checking into Sick Building Syndrome, and used the most frequently mentioned symptoms in *Breathe*.

SA: Big business attitudes are also at the heart of *Breathe*. Where did you get your oh-so-accurate view of corporate empires?

CF: I've worked with enough of them to know what it's like. Try Warner Bros in Holborn and Channel Four in Horseferry Road – they're pretty depressing places because corporate behaviour is required to override any human emotion like passion or trust – and god forbid you come up with a mad idea! My worst corporate experience was with Warner Bros executives a few years ago, who simply didn't understand what on earth they were doing in their jobs – it was like dealing with lost children.

SA: Why did you create this barren business atmosphere in *Breathe*, then drop in a hoard of brainless humans?

CF: Work-zombies are all around us. We can see that this is how US businesses are run, and we're encouraged to be the same. The great thing about zombies is that they're us – so when one reaches out his hand and says 'Join us', there's an almost tempting part that suggests it would be easy to give in and let someone else take control. Hence the popularity of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.

SA: Your zombies aren't the traditional re-animated dead people though, are they?

CF: No, you don't have to be dead to be a zombie. To me 'Zombie' signifies someone who has surrendered their free

EVERYONE HAS TO DO IT

CHRISTOPHER FOWLER INTERVIEWED

SANDY AUDEN

will to primal urges, like traffic wardens. Besides, dead zombies limit you; they hardly ever speak and only ever eat brains, whereas these ones carry on with their work, or obsess about problems in the office. I liked the idea of someone staying at their work station even though they had accidentally cut their fingers off.

SA: You say in your article that you wanted to write simply and directly again and *Breathe* certainly shows a different, more cinematic style for you. How did you decide on the style?

CF: I meant it to read like the book of the film you haven't yet seen yet! By writing mainly about what can be seen, you keep everything immediate and fast. My intention was to turn back the clock to a less complex style, and I kind of wonder if it really is possible. In one way, I was annoyed by this method of streamlining the story because I was tempted to add all sorts of other stuff – in another way it was a great discipline, and I found it a very easy, natural way of writing. I'll certainly streamline a little more in future.

SA: Why is it important, at this stage of your life, to have the style change and try something different?

CF: I guess because I'm doing the Bryant & May mystery series for Transworld publishers, I also want to be able to have fun in other areas and keep experimenting. Too many ideas, too little time.

SA: What are the Bryant & May mysteries all about?

CF: Bryant & May have actually been with me for a long time, through all the different tags I've been given by publishers, so they can range from horror and crime to fantasy, but at the moment I'm suing them for a crime series.

Detective Arthur Bryant was born in Whitechapel in the thirties. He's tortoise-like, always cold, scarf-wrapped, well-read, esoteric, eccentric, rude, bad-tempered, myopic, and smokes cannabis for arthritis. He has an information network of psychics, healers and new age fringe dwellers. Married once, his French wife Nathalie died during war (she fell off a bridge). He never remarried. He's a loner who's had a heart attack, and never sleeps. People always ask Bryant if he wants to take his scarf off. Bryant's phone plays Gilbert & Sullivan tunes and picks up old radio shows. He smokes a pipe in an attempt to out-pollute May and his cigars. He accidentally destroys any technology he touches and loves London.

Detective John May is Bryant's alter-ego. He was born in Vauxhall and has a grand-daughter called April. Taller, fitter, charming, technology-friendly, three years younger than Bryant, he drives a restored Mercedes classic. He walks to Waterloo Bridge every night with Bryant, and is still a bit of a womaniser. His daughter died in tragic circumstances, his estranged son Alex lives in Canada and grand-daughter April is agoraphobic.

Together with Bryant, he runs the Peculiar Crimes Unit, which handles the cases the Met can't deal with because they're too esoteric or downright odd.

SA: Why didn't you channel the *Breathe* idea into Bryant & May instead?

CF: I have too many ideas and not enough strands to put them in. Writing a series is both easier and harder than writing stand-alone novels. On one hand, you have continuing characters with whom you feel comfortable. On the other, you have to keep a sense of continuation to the books that might restrict you. From now on, there will be three distinct strands to my work: the Bryant & May novels, the short stories and a stream of other novels that don't fit the first two categories, like *Breathe*.

SA: And finally, was *Breathe* intended as a cautionary tale about a harsh corporate future, or just a bit of fun?

CF: Oh, I think it's a bit of fun, but I do like to bounce off of the things I see going on around me in the city. My only regret is giving the villain a cricket bat, because after I'd written it I saw *Shaun of the Dead* and thought 'Rats, he's come up with the same thing.' Logical really, as it's such an English symbol.

You don't have to be dead to be a zombie. To me 'Zombie' signifies someone who has surrendered their free will to primal urges, like traffic wardens. Besides, dead zombies limit you; they hardly ever speak and only ever eat brains, whereas these ones carry on with their work, or obsess about problems in the office. I liked the idea of someone staying at their work station even though they had accidentally cut their fingers off

Breathe by Christopher Fowler
Telos pb, 102pp, £7.99

"Here it is, Patre. A piece of the True Cross."

The boy whispers, as if he's afraid someone in the narrow alleyways of the medina outside the shop will hear us. His name is Mohammed. He has told me that his family has been selling relics on this tiny street in Jerusalem ever since Christ was crucified here a thousand years ago. He said this so proudly, and in such excellent Latin, that I believed him, even though I was warned before my journey that all infidels are liars.

Mohammed glances back over his shoulder at his father, then carefully places a fragment of wood in my cupped palm. My eyes are not what they used to be, and so I have to squint down at it. The piece from the Cross is little more than a splinter, silvery gray, as if worn by storms. The tip is slightly darker. Perhaps a drop of Our Savior's blood fell on it at the very moment of his death.

"Patre?" Mohammed tugs at the sleeve of my cassock. He is young, perhaps only ten or eleven. But he's so thin and anxious, his brow wrinkling as he looks up at me, that he seems like an old man. "I would not cheat you. Perhaps a different . . . "

Mohammed's father steps forward, hurriedly. "What my son meant to say, Patre, is that we will give you a special price. Because you are a holy man. Please forgive him. He is a worthless boy, still learning." He gives his son a look that makes me think Mohammed will be beaten later for his mistake.

"Your son has been most helpful," I say, quickly. "He's a very intelligent boy."

Mohammed smiles at me. The smile makes him look healthier.

Mohammed's father is shorter than I am, and he's so fat his dark skin overlaps the neck of his long, striped robe. I don't know his name. He was introduced to me only as Abu Mohammed, the father of Mohammed. That's how infidels name themselves, after their children. He and his son share the same curved nose and heavy eyelids, but the resemblance only makes the boy's gauntness more startling. I wonder if Mohammed's dinner depends on whether he sells me the relic. If I had not been called by God to join the monastery thirty years ago, I might have married Hosefina and had children. If so, they would never have gone hungry, even if Hosefina and I had starved.

I'm tempted to buy the relic for Mohammed's sake alone, but the alms box at St. Alexius contained so little money, and I still need to pay for a caravan home.

So I say, gently, "St. Christophe, a church in the village close to ours, already has a piece of the True Cross. I need to find something else. Something that will draw pilgrims to our church from a thousand miles away, not just now but for a thousand years to come."

Mohammed's father opens a silver casket containing a finger bone of John the Baptist. It's worn smooth, doubtless by the touch of thousands of living fingers since the saint's death. I touch it as well, but I shake my head. I shake my head when Mohammed offers me a crystal vial half-filled with an opalescent liquid.

"Milk from the breast of your Virgin," his father says, his impatience beginning to show.

But I refuse it as well, and a bloody scrap of material that covered St. Catherine before she died on the wheel, and a chip of one of the arrowheads that pierced St. Sebastian. I don't know what I'm hoping to find, or why these relics disappoint me.

Finally, Mohammed's father says

SUSAN FRY

FATHER GREGORI'S RELIC

something to his son in the infidel's tongue, of which I speak only a few words. Mohammed looks uneasy, shifts from foot to foot, but finally says, "Come with us, Patre."

I visited St. Christophe last year. Abbot Theodosius sent me, after the upsetting incident in our chapel, saying a pilgrimage might offer me what I sought. I didn't understand, because what else could I need but the love of God?

The piece of the Cross at St. Christophe was reddish-brown, not silver. It must have been taken from a different part of the Cross than Mohammed's. The monks housed it in a gilded cage on top of a marble pillar. The marble was so white it glowed in the gloom of the church. Inside the cage, the relic rested on a red velvet cushion.

Pilgrims crowded into the church. I saw parents carrying a sick girl, her arms and legs as thin as sticks. A man and his wife shuffled along next to me, their eyes red and swollen from weeping over some tragedy I couldn't guess. A blind old man was led along by six of his grandchildren, each of them taking turns to put their hands on his shoulders to help him through the church. I was the only one there alone.

I watched the pilgrims write their troubles on scraps of paper and push them into the cage, until the velvet cushion rested on a sea of paper. Then they walked away, comforted, their faces dry. They dropped coins into the alms box as they left, the noise echoing through the church. The alms box was enormous, almost the size of the altar at St. Alexius. No wonder the walls of St. Christophe's were hung with rich tapestries embroidered with gold thread. No wonder the sweet, cinnamon smell of incense filled the church. St. Alexius was too poor for incense, and our walls were bare.

When my turn came, I sank down onto a stone floor that had been worn hollow from other pilgrims' knees. I folded my hands and gazed at the piece of the Cross, waiting for whatever Father Theodosius said I would find. I waited, and I waited. My knees soon ached. I found myself wondering what sorrows I would have written down on a scrap of paper, like the other pilgrims. Faces danced across my memory – Abbot Theodosius, Hosephina, my mother, the man in the chapel whose child I had baptized. My eyes dipped in shame at the last memory, and I saw the words carved into the marble at the base of the white pillar: *Blessed be Phillipus Christofedes, who returned with this relic from the Holy City in the Year Of Our Lord 832.*

I reached out and ran my fingers along the *B* in *Blessed*. To my surprise, the groove was worn down, as if many pilgrims before me had done the same thing. I was suddenly envious of Phillipus Christofedes, whoever he was. To have brought such comfort to so many. To have had his name remembered by so many.

That's when God sent me the idea.

I returned to St. Alexius and sought out Abbot Theodosius. I found him praying in the ossuary, where all the monks of St. Alexius were laid to rest. I had never liked the ossuary. I preferred to pray above-ground, in the vast, pillared hall of the nave. I would kneel before the altar and chant my prayers, and God would reach down to me through the golden fingers of sunlight streaming in from the tall windows. He would speak to me in the pure, piercing voices of the choirboys. He would reveal his infinite love for me through the figure of his Son on the Cross.

I never understood why so many of the

IMAGES by VINCENT CHONG

monks, especially the older ones, prayed in the ossuary. It was a dank, dark cave, lined with shelves that were packed tightly with skulls. The skulls stretched all the way back down the narrow tunnel to the time of the church's founding. The shelves nearest the steps were empty, waiting for the next monks to die.

As I ducked my head under the low ceiling, I saw Abbot Theodosius, kneeling in front of a single candle. He smiled and gestured for me to join him. The candle was just bright enough to illuminate the skulls closest to us. It flickered as I sank down, and the bony faces seemed to laugh at me.

"My son, I'm relieved you have returned safely. Did you find what you sought?"

"Oh, yes, Father." I told him about the riches of St. Christophe, and the healed pilgrims, and the carved letters in the pillar. I expected his face to light up with joy, but instead he frowned.

"Buy a relic? With the money for the poor?"

"A relic could provide not just for them, but also for their children, and their children's children," I protested.

Abbot Theodosius sighed, the candle flickered, and the skulls seemed to laugh even more vigorously. I looked away from them and at the empty shelf. Which part of that shelf would house Abbot Theodosius? Or me?

"Do you remember Brother Salvatore?" Abbot Theodosius asked, suddenly.

I opened my eyes. "Of course. He worked in the infirmary when I first came to St. Alexius."

"And Father Belisarius?"

I found myself smiling. "He liked music. His voice was terrible, but he sang in the choir anyway."

"Yes. And Father Nicodemus?" Abbot Theodosius reached out and ran his finger down the dome of one of the skulls. It was mottled brown with age, or with dirt, and a spiderweb-shaped crack meandered over one eye, a sign that even bones collapse into dust.

I found myself shuddering at the thought of touching that bone, though it would probably feel much like the marble letters I had touched at St. Christophe – smooth and cool. "Was that skull Father Nicodemus?" I asked.

Abbot Theodosius raised his eyebrows in surprise. "I don't know."

"Which skull was Father Belisarius? Brother Salvatore?"

The Abbot frowned. "My son," he said, gently, "it doesn't matter. They are with God."

"But even the poorest man in our parish leaves a tombstone behind him." My voice rose, echoing through the tunnel.

I saw the disappointment on Abbot Theodosius's face. Then he put his hand on my shoulder. "Or children, to carry on his name," he said.

I could not meet his eyes.

Abbot Theodosius sighed and dropped his hand. "My son, go and find your relic."

Mohammed and his father lead me to the slave market. It's just past the butcher's quarter, and both areas smell the same, like horse dung and blood. The butchers advertise shanks of fat-streaked lamb, limp-feathered birds, and organs stacked in glistening piles. The slavers peddle men, women, and children. I am sickened to see that even infants are held up, screaming, over the heads of the crowd.

I have never traveled far, and in my village most people look as I do, with dark, curling hair, dark eyes, and brown skin a few shades lighter than Mohammed's. But here I see men with skin as black as obsidian, children with tilted, almond-shaped eyes, and even a woman taller than I, with blue eyes and yellow hair. Mohammed tells me she is one of the barbarians from far up north. I have never seen a woman with such pale eyes or skin, and I stare at her until Mohammed's father beckons to me.

He stands in front of a cart with a wicker cage on top, the kind that's used to transport chickens. A tattered blanket shields the contents of the cart. Mohammed's father flings the blanket back.

Inside the cart, a naked man lies on dirty straw. Even after seeing the different people in the market, I gasp. This man's curly hair is white, his skin even more white. I do not mean pale, like the woman from the north, but white. White as the marble pillar at St. Christophe's. So white I can see the blue veins branching down the hollows of his wrists. His muscles are as sharply defined as a statue's, and his face looks carved as well, his cheekbones and nose honed to perfection. If he stood up, he would be far taller than I am. Nearly a giant.

Mohammed's father rattles the wicker bars of the cage, and the man stirs, lifts his head, and half opens his eyes. They are a color I've never seen in eyes – the color of light on water, the color of desert sand at dawn. His pupils are tiny pinpricks, like the pupils of a man who has been struck on the head. That's when I notice the wound crusted with blood on his temple and the bruises shadowing his ribs.

Mohammed's father snaps his fingers impatiently. "Well?"

I glance at Mohammed, but he bites his lip and looks at the ground.

"I don't understand." I shake my head.

Mohammed's father mutters something, then thrusts his hands through the bars and roughly pushes the man onto his side. "There," he says.

At first, I think the man has been whipped. The two wounds down his back are straight and deep, crimson against his white skin, and puckered at the edges. They look like someone struck him twice with a knotted bar, or ran over him with a wagon. Or ripped something out of his back, by the roots.

"Our Lord Jesus Christ, Savior," I whisper. I cross myself with three shaking fingers, three times. I taste bitterness in the back of my throat.

Mohammed's father smiles. "You see," he says, spreading his hands wide, satisfied with my reaction.

Fury chokes my voice. "You were going to sell him as a slave?"

He shrugs. "We're not Christian. He doesn't have the same importance to us as he does to you."

His eyes slide slowly along the white body in the cart, and I realize for what purpose the angel would have been sold. I've never been cursed with the desire for men myself, though I have counseled many members of my parish for this sin. Women did torment me for much of my youth, though that desire has faded, even for Hosephina, the woman I think I could have loved if I had not been drawn to God. She used to appear to me in dreams, with flashing eyes and enormous, naked

breasts. She still appears now, from time to time, but these new dreams are different. In them, she lives in a small house with three children. I don't know whether these are the children that she and I could have had, or whether my dreams are true visions that show the woman she became with another man. But the sight of the children hurts me more than my unsatisfied lust.

"How did you get him?"

Mohammed's father pauses. His gaze flickers from side to side. If I couldn't see the angel with my own eyes, I would think Mohammed's father was about to lie to me. Finally, he says, "A caravan was passing by a mountaintop. He lay at the base of it, as if he'd fallen from a great height. There had been a storm – lightning had destroyed many trees."

I nod. I lick my lips. They are as dry as dust. "And his . . . wings?"

Mohammed's father hesitates again. "We took them off." He puts a slight inflection on the word 'took' that implies the violence of the wound. "To keep him from escaping, of course. Then, yesterday, the wife of a wealthy man saw them. She wanted them."

"For what?"

He shrugs, waves his hand as if batting away flies. "Decoration? They were beautiful. Purple feathers, and green and blue and silver."

I close my eyes in horror. I imagine the angel as he must have been – bright wings against white skin, his enormous height, and the power of his beauty. He would light up our church like a beacon. People would come from all corners of the world. My parish would prosper for generations to come.

Mohammed's father names a price that makes me gasp. The leather bag around my neck contains much less, but it would still feed our poor for two years. I hesitate, wondering if Abbot Theodosius was right. I look at the figure on the straw. His eyes are closed again, his mouth slack, his knees curled up against his belly. Despite his size, he looks like sleeping child.

Behind his father, Mohammed blinks at me, rapidly. I realize he's trying to tell me I could bargain his father down. I'm touched by his concern, but it seems blasphemous to haggle over a creature of God. So I tell Mohammed's father, honestly, the amount of money I carry.

"But," I add, "if I pay you all that I have, I will not be able to get home."

Mohammed's father smiles. "I am sure others of your faith would pay to see an angel here in Jerusalem as well. You could earn enough that way to go home."

I nod, slowly. I pull the bag out from under my robe, I weigh it in my hands for a moment, then upend it into Mohammed's palm. Behind him, his father smiles again. I hope that Mohammed will eat tonight.

But Mohammed doesn't look happy. As his father turns to go, he slips a piece of the silver back into my hands. "For food," he whispers, glancing at the angel. "So he doesn't die."

"Angels are immortal," I reply, gently, offering the silver back to him. I wonder if I could convert Mohammed to the true faith. He's such a kind boy.

"Take it," he insists, and so I finally tuck the piece of silver back into my bag, hoping his father won't find out what he's done. Mohammed looks at me as if he pities me. He doesn't understand that I pity him, for not understanding what he and his father have given up.

I haven't thought of my mother since I knelt at St. Christophe's, but I think of her tonight as I feed the angel. With Mohammed's piece of silver, I have bought yogurt and flatbread, the same food my mother fed me when I was a child. In the dim evening light, I can even imagine that the angel's head in my lap is hers, his white curls really her silvery hair, and that I am tending her in the fever that eventually killed her.

The fantasy lasts only for a moment. Then I tip too much food into the angel's mouth, and he coughs and brings it up again. I feel no disgust, even though tending the sick has always been my least favorite duty. Baptisms were my favorite, but I never saw the messes that the children made, only the babies as clean little bundles laughing up at me, then bursting into indignant howls when I doused them in cold water, then laughing again a few minutes later. I suppose parents get used to the messes.

I clean the angel's body and the straw underneath him. I don't even hold my nose when the smell burns the back of my throat. I clean his wound, wincing as the soap loosens the scab and blood flows. I never imagined that angels could eat, or bleed. He groans as I'm washing him. I take that as a good sign. The sound is high-pitched, which suits him because he seems young, though I know that angels are older than the earth.

As I wash him, I murmur all the names of the angels I can remember. Amitiel, Anafiel, Chamuel, Egion, Gadiel . . . He stirs slightly at the name 'Gadiel'. I stop and stare at him. 'Gadiel' is the angel who punishes pride. I say a few more names, to make sure, but he does not move again.

"Very well," I whisper. "Gadiel." His name makes me uneasy. It seems unlucky.

I feed him the rest of the yogurt. I didn't have enough money to buy food for myself, so my stomach grumbles. To distract myself from hunger, I find myself telling Gadiel about my mother, who didn't want me to become a priest. I had expected she would be as joyful as I was. But she burst into tears.

"How can you do this to me, Gregori? You're leaving me alone. No son, no grandchildren. I will die alone."

She sank onto the wooden chair I had made for her a few years before, and looked around the small house we had lived in since my father's death. The light from the window fell over her face. Only a few wrinkles marred her cheeks. My mother was a beautiful woman and could have remarried easily, people said. But she had loved my father. She always told me she couldn't find another man who was his equal.

I had never considered my mother in my decision, and I was ashamed. "You're right, Mother, please forgive me." I knelt next her. I tried to make myself say, "I won't go." But I couldn't speak.

Her mouth twisted. She gently touched my cheek. "Perhaps this is a test," she said. "To prove you love God more than anything or anyone else."

I covered her hand with my own. It felt fragile and infinitely small. I tried again to say I wouldn't leave her. I failed.

After a moment of silence, her mouth twisted again. "Then go," she said.

My mother died a few years later. She was right. Without me there to take care of her, she died alone.

Holding the weight of Gadiel's head in my lap, I suddenly wonder if he has a family pining for him. Perhaps the Lord has placed Gadiel in my hands so I can free him, drag the cart to the top of the tallest mountain and watch the other angels descend in a shower of gold to reclaim him. But then my parish would remain poor. And, after all, angels do not fornicate or reproduce. Gadiel, like a monk, would have no family.

Gadiel falls asleep, and I move his head off my lap, careful not to wake him. I wrap myself in my cloak and lie down on the cobblestones in front of the cart, trying to ignore my empty stomach. Instead, I imagine pilgrims lined up to kneel in front of Gadiel's cage at St. Alexius. I imagine the cage resting on a marble pillar.

Perhaps my parish would even carve the pillar with the words Father Gregori brought this here to us, and my name would not vanish forever, after all.

The next morning, Gadiel is alert, his eyes open, and his pupils larger. I feed him again, this time allowing myself a few mouthfuls, too. By the end of the morning, he's able to sit up. Once, he looks as if he wants to speak to me. I lean forward, but his eyes droop closed. His exhaustion and bruises are to be expected, I suppose. A fall like that would crush a man into nothingness.

People stream by me into the marketplace, and I remember I must earn enough money to return to St. Alexius. So I drape the blanket over the cage and gather the courage to approach the passersby. "Sir, come and see the angel Gadiel . . . Madam, an angel of the Lord . . . " But

people glance at me as if I am mad, or roll their eyes as if I am trying to cheat them.

I have yet to attract one customer when I see the boy Mohammed on the other side of the square, watching me. He wears the same clothes as the day before, and the sunlight reveals the ragged patches where his knees poke through. If hate were allowed by the Lord our God, I would hate Mohammed's father. He does not know the value of what God has given him.

"Do you need help, Patre?" I laugh at this offer from a boy in ragged clothes. But Mohammed looks at me thoughtfully and tells me I need to learn how to draw people to see my merchandise.

"The way you drew me in, outside your shop?" I ask.

"Yes," he says, and looks away. But then his face lights up. "Wait here, Patre."

I wait, halfheartedly approaching more of the people that stream pass me on their way to buy or sell slaves. Finally, Mohammed returns, his arms piled high with what I think at first are dingy blankets. But when he spreads them out on the ground, I see they are actually the two truncated wings of an enormous bird. The feathers might once have been white, but now they are dirty and torn. The stumps are bloody where they were cut off.

Mohammed cleans off the blood with a handful of straw from the cage. "They're from the butchers," he says, smiling at me. He leans them against the cart. "Now people will believe you have an angel to show them."

"But the wings are a lie," I whisper. I don't know whether I'm more dismayed by the falsehood, or by the difference between the dirty feathers and the iridescent ones of my imagination.

"You don't have to say they are his wings, Patre."

I hear a reproach in Mohammed's voice, and I realize I have not even thanked him. "No," I say. "Perhaps not." Then I praise him for his industry.

He beams, his face rounding. "Next," he says, "I'll show you what to say." He climbs up onto the top of the cart. Behind the curtain, I hear Gadiel cry out in alarm, but Mohammed's voice overpowers him. "Come and see," Mohammed calls out, "an Angel of the Christian God, brought down by lightning." He flings his arms wide and points at the first person to glance up at him. "You, sir, aren't you curious?"

To my surprise, the man gives me the money Mohammed asks for. The next man does as well, and three women after him. To some of our visitors – a dark-skinned man with a silver ring in his nose and a woman with red hair – I have to explain about angels and the nature of our Lord. I comfort myself that the angel suits a dual purpose, to instruct as well as to awe. I speak my lessons loudly, hoping Mohammed will listen, too.

By the end of the day, I have enough to pay for our voyage home. So I buy food and insist that Mohammed take an equal share. The angel is well enough to feed himself. I'm surprised by the pang of regret I feel at this. I console myself by pressing more food on Mohammed, and more, until he claims he has never been so full. He eats with his right hand, squatting on his heels. I kneel and eat with both my hands. Even so, while we eat I find myself forgetting he's an infidel.

"I hope you won't be in trouble with your father."

Mohammed shrugs and takes another bite of flatbread. "As long as I finish my work, he doesn't care what else I do."

I sigh. I tell him about a baptism I performed the year before, for the son of a man I had known for many years. His face glowed with pride when I lifted his baby up.

"What's wrong?" Mohammed leans forward, peering at my face.

I lift my hand and realize my cheeks are wet. I try to smile. "I always cry when I think of it," I say.

"Why?"

I shrug. I don't want to tell him the rest. That I held the baby too long after the water had dribbled down his face. That his father's joy had turned to bewilderment as he tried to take the child from me and I wouldn't let him go. I couldn't stop staring down at the child. His face was so smooth, his eyelids as heavy and soft as Hosephina's. At that age all children look alike. He could

have easily been mine and Hosephina's. I can still feel the rough blanket that wrapped the child, and the comforting weight of his body. Then one of the brothers had called Abbot Theodosius, and I'd relinquished the child to him.

But Mohammed nods, as if I have explained something. "I would like to see St. Alexius," he says, slowly.

"Perhaps you will, someday."

"Really?"

I smile at the thought. I wonder how Abbot Theodosius would feel if I returned from this pilgrimage with Mohammed. I could train him to be a monk, or even just convert him and watch him grow old in my parish.

At that instant, Gadiel speaks. I'm so startled I jump to my feet. I'm even more startled to realize I'd forgotten all about him.

Gadiel points at the food, and the sounds come from his mouth again. My first thought is disappointment. His words are rough and guttural, and I had imagined they would be pure and clear. But perhaps my ears are too crude to hear him properly. I give the angel more food. I watch as he finishes it and falls asleep. I have to admit he is not what I would have expected an angel to be.

I turn to tell Mohammed this, but the boy is gone. I don't know when he left, and I find I'm hurt that he didn't say goodbye. I know I'll probably never see him again. I tell myself it doesn't matter. It is through Gadiel that my parish will prosper long past my death. Not through some infidel boy.

When I turn back to the cage, the angel has rolled onto his side. The scars from where his wings once were are horribly dark against his white skin. He stirs, scissoring his legs for a moment, the way I've seen dogs do in sleep, when they're dreaming of running. I wonder if Gadiel is dreaming about flying. For the first time, it occurs to me that it may not be so easy to keep Gadiel in a cage at St. Alexius. He might be unhappy. Even without wings, he might not want to stay.

He rolls over again, and the wicker bars of the cage groan from his weight. For a moment I fear Gadiel will break through them and be lost to me. But the bars hold.

Mohammed returns the next morning, ready for work. I'm surprised how happy I am to see him, and a little worried. He is another man's child, not mine. So I tell him he should go back to work with his father, that I have enough money. He disagrees.

"A little extra won't hurt, Patre. You never know what else you might want to take home with you."

"I have everything I need," I say, firmly.

Mohammed bites his lip and turns away. But a few minutes later, he's perched back up on the cart, and soon a crowd gathers around us. I decide I can give the extra money to Mohammed, so he can grow fat in my absence. The thought makes me happy throughout the day, as I go into to the crowd, collecting coins and signaling to Mohammed to pull up the blanket around the cart. Each time, Gadiel blinks in the sunlight, sitting on the bed of straw the way the relic of St. Christophe lay on its crumpled paper.

Near the end of the day, just as the blanket rises, someone jostles me and pushes to the front of the crowd.

"You, there," Mohammed cries out. "You must pay first."

The man is tall, with the same yellow hair and blue eyes as the woman I saw my first day at the market. He wears armor that looks like it has been patched together from many old pieces of leather, and a long scar curls down his arm. I'm afraid he'll hurt Mohammed, so I fight my way through the crowd.

"Pay?" The man scowls up at Mohammed, then takes a good look into the cage.

The angel scrambles to his feet. It's the first time I have seen him stand. He laces his fingers through the bars of his cage and babbles to the man. The man narrows his eyes and frowns.

Mohammed drops down off the top of the cart. Worried someone in the crowd might step on him, I grasp him by the arm. Mohammed doesn't realize I am trying to help him, and he struggles.

"Please sir," I say to the man, when I have Mohammed firmly in my grip. "I'm trying to earn enough money to take the angel Gadiel – "

"Angel?" The man looks down at me, his lip twisting.

I tell him about angels, and about our Lord the Savior. But halfway into my explanation he frowns, uninterested. He turns and says something to Gadiel, who tilts his head as if trying to understand.

A cold, slow fear trickles across my belly.

The man with the scar turns back to me. "Who are you trying to cheat?" he demands. "The man you have here is from the north, farther north than my family, up where the mountains are made of ice. I don't speak his language, but I recognize the dialect. I served with many of his countrymen. They're all mercenaries, like myself."

"You lie." I don't realize I've tried to strike him until he knocks my hand away, laughing.

Then he calls out to the crowd, "Don't waste your money."

The people in the crowd surge toward me. I grasp my leather bag with the hand that is not holding Mohammed and fling the contents at them. Coins shower onto the cobblestones, and the people scrabble on their hands and knees to find them. A fight breaks out over one of the coins, and soon the crowd has forgotten all about us.

I look down at Mohammed. I begin to shake, not just my knees and my hands, but my entire body. The ground trembles under my feet. "You knew." Mohammed won't meet my eyes.

The earth heaves me up, and I land with my face against the cold cobblestones. Mohammed's hands are on my shoulders. He's begging my forgiveness. His words tumble out like the coins from my bag, as meaningless as the coins. I taste mud in my mouth.

"Your father didn't remove his wings? Or sell them to a merchant's wife?"

Mohammed slowly shakes his head. "My father found him as he is. But he could be one of your angels. His wounds could be from wings. We can still take him back to St. Alexius."

"We?"

Mohammed nods. He grasps my robe, the way my mother did. "No one needs to know that he might not be real."

I feel as if I'm choking. I can see my name carved into a stone at St. Alexius, Father Gregori, the Fool. This thought strikes me like a blow. Was this what I really wanted? To have my name carved in stone? I imagine Abbot Theodosius, shaking his head at me.

"I would know," I say. "I would know he isn't real."

Mohammed's eyes are wide and desperate. "Please." I stare at him. After a moment, he pulls away. I let him go, and he vanishes into the crowd.

It's nearly sunset. The air is cold. In the cart, Gadiel has his fingers between the bars. He's gazing out over the square, as if looking for the man whose words he almost understood. His beauty still takes my breath away. In the twilight, his skin is so pale that a light seems to shine from it. Surely even Mohammed would believe Gadiel was an angel if he saw him now.

But I have no right to keep an angel, or a man, captive for my own vanity, for the fear of vanishing into the darkness without a trace.

Slowly, I walk up to the cart. I reach up and unlatch the cage. It swings open. Gadiel stares at me, incredulous, and I remember how he had looked the night before, helpless on the straw, his mouth open and needy. Now his eyes are so bright their heat burns me. "Go!" I shout.

He gathers his limbs and flies out the door into the crowd, without a single look back. As I left my mother, and all children leave their parents.

His foot knocks against one of the bloody wings. It skitters across the stones. I pick up the wings and touch them, gently, running my hand across the feathers. Mohammed's gift to me. The feathers are soft, despite the blood and the dirt. I slowly climb up into the cart and cover myself with the wings. They are warm.

Susan has sold stories to many magazines and anthologies. Earlier this year she won the Phobos Science Fiction Contest.

GOTHIC WINE by DARREN SPEEGLE

Aardwolf Press pb, 218pp, $14.95 www.aardwolfpress.com

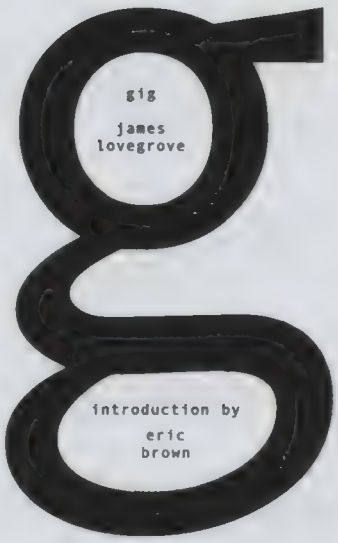
This first collection of sixteen stories by an American author currently resident in Germany, has about it the feel of older work by writers such as Blackwood and Aickman, though Speegle's prose touch is far lighter. For Speegle, as for those other writers, Europe is a place of mystery, with the outward veneer of culture, as typified by such things as a love of fine wine, only the cloth thrown over some far darker reality, a hidden world into which his characters unwittingly stumble to their cost.

This take on the genre of supernatural horror is seen in the opening story, 'Chasing Fuseli', in which images from a painting by the Gothic artist invade a man's life and expose him to a different level of reality, cleverly obscuring the borders between our own world and some dream dimension, leaving the reader with the desire but not permission to dismiss it all as a vivid nightmare, froth on the surface of a disturbed mind. In 'Red View' an American abroad is fascinated by a prostitute he meets and the experience of that chance encounter colours his whole world, while 'Frail is the Cord' has a man's relationship with a woman undermined by her two strange children, a story that effectively unsettles the reader with its persistent hints of something terrible taking place in the background, evident and yet never truly seen. Phil Cranston, the protagonist of 'Valley of Silence', goes to spend a last vacation with his estranged sister, now dying of cancer, and the shadows of the past come back to haunt him, memories of things thought but never spoken, making this perhaps the most sensitive and finely characterised story in the collection, with the horror a part of our own wounded psyches. In 'Porta Niagra' the cursed spirit of a long dead archbishop roams the streets of an ancient city in search of human flesh, while in the marvellous 'Buoyancy' an American divorcé in Europe looking for adventure meets a man who is determined to float away, a story in which madness and the outré overlap and destroy all boundary lines. Another American abroad buys a ticket to the 'End of the Line', a story strongly reminiscent of Blackwood's 'Ancient Sorceries', and washes up in an isolated German town where the locals all seems to be suffering from mass hallucination, manifested in strange behaviour into which he himself is sucked. 'The Wholesome Scent of Cedar', one of the most macabre and chilling stories in the collection, tells of a serial killer who dresses his victims as priests.

Not everything is of the first quality. 'A Train Named Happenstance' has a brief encounter end with an insurance investigator becoming part of the rail accident he is looking into, and is almost wholly predictable and informed with a sense that we have been here many times before, while 'Farewell, Summer' contains little that Bradbury didn't do far better at least better forty years earlier in 'Touched with Fire'. But there are bound to be disappointments with almost any collection of short stories and *Gothic Wine* contains gratifyingly few such incidents. Last story in the book is the remarkable 'Textures', a ghost tale with a difference, as a man comes to realise that the person with whom he is romantically involved is the woman his delusional ex-wife accused him of cheating with, a case of déjà vu as haunting, and what a wonderful idea. It's a fitting end to a collection that shows there's plenty of life left in the short form and comes highly recommended.

GIG by JAMES LOVEGROVE

PS Publishing hb, 267pp, £35 www.pspublishing.co.uk



This book consists of two linked novellas, 'Mik' and 'Kim', published back to back as per the old Ace Doubles. The eponymous Mik is Mike Dyer, superstar lead singer of rock band God Dog, hotly tipped as the next big thing, returning to their home town of Rotor City to play the last concert in their current tour. The story is told through the eyes of Mik's best friend and constant companion, Dave Noon. In the hours leading up to the concert they revisit local spots, scenes of youthful trials and tribulations, the events that shaped who they are today, and the truth of the you can never go home axiom is never more apparent. Something else is going on though. Earlier Mik threatened to break up the band and chance remarks suggest this was more than a fit of rock star petulance. He has an agenda, but what this is only becomes apparent to Dave as the concert reaches it peak. Kim is Rotor City native Kim Reid, who can make claims to be Mik's No.1 fan; she knows all of his songs by heart, has studied the details of his life and even looks and dresses like his female counterpart. Kim believes that in a drug trip she actually met Mik himself on some other plane and that he gave her a job to do. To complete her assignment Kim must secure an access all areas pass to the concert that night, and she will do practically anything to make that happen. Thus the stage is set for the grand finale, a rock concert that will give birth to a legend.

These two works of fiction complement each other, like the independent parts of some greater whole, giving us an overview of fame, one that embraces both the perspective of the celebrity and that of his admirer. Put together they deftly portray the formative events in the life of somebody who went on to become a superstar and hint at how wearisome the burden of fame, for which most of us long without giving it a second thought, can become. The picture of the music industry is thoroughly convincing, so that you never doubt for a moment that this is the way it is, with everyone scrabbling after their piece of the pie or looking for an angle, and the few who are in it for love of the music serving as lone voices in some wilderness. Lovegrove's descriptions of the final concert are simply superb, bringing alive the fervour and passion of such an event in a way that eludes most writers, tellingly capturing the synergy that develops between band and audience. The only false note in the entire book is struck when Kim wanders through Yeltley, an area of Rotor City where people take their music so seriously it leads to fights between rival groups of supporters, with fans of the Late and Early Beatles engaged in all out war. Entertaining as it was when taken in isolation, this episode stretched credibility past breaking point and

CASE NOTES

PETER TENNANT

intruded a superficial element.

Lovegrove is fixed firmly in my mind as a writer who enjoys tricks, and his invention is unflagging here, exemplified by the mirror image titles of the two novellas, a love of palindromes that carries over into the body of the text, with corresponding chapters, names of places and characters all given the treatment, an effect that doesn't alter the basic story in any way. In less skilled hands this could soon become annoying, but here the playfulness of these word games adds an element of pleasure, an appreciation of the writer's cleverness, while at the same time reinforcing the relationship between the two main characters, the sense that they are twin sides of the same coin. That these novellas are clever is undeniable, but that's far from being all they are. They come with an underlying depth and sensitivity that make them that little bit special.

BOOK REVIEWS

The picture of the music industry is thoroughly convincing, so that you never doubt for a moment that this is the way it is, with everyone scrabbling after their piece of the pie or looking for an angle

A TASTE FOR BLOOD by DIANA LEE

Harrington Park Press pb, 389pp, $18.95 www.haworthpress.com

This is billed as lesbian vampire erotica and is the story of the young Carisa, who is seduced by Ryan, more formally known as Lord Wolf, in reality a woman masquerading as a man to retain her power and social standing, but also an eight hundred year old vampire. The two elope together, posing as man and wife and setting up court at Ryan's ancestral home in Victorian Scotland. Carisa is made into a vampire and has to learn not only to use her powers responsibly, but also deal with vampire politics and Edinburgh's vampire Queen Alyssa, who sees Ryan as a potential rival. Ryan tells Carisa of her past and the important part Carisa's family have always played in her life, with several of her ancestors as lovers, but neglects to mention the role Carisa is to play in her plan for revenge on Blake, the one who made her into a vampire.

I have mixed feelings about this novel. It picks up on just about every vampire cliché in the book, all the power politics stuff and vampires as aristocrats. The writing is at times clumsy and inelegant, while the way in which sex scenes are interposed at regular intervals, lively as some of them are, eventually becomes a bit tiresome. And yet I did find myself identifying somewhat with the characters and feeling for them, with powerful psychological twists in the narrative, such as Ryan's reluctance to be penetrated because Blake raped her. Lee draws a comparison between the vampire's lot and that of a woman/lesbian in Victorian society which gives the novel an effective subtext and still speaks to readers in the present day. You suspect that, for many of the couple's enemies, lesbianism is more of an issue than the bloodsucking. Carisa's training in the use of her vampire abilities is handled convincingly, while both period and setting, Victorian Edinburgh, are brought to compelling life on the page. There is plenty of social commentary on issues of the day, not just the rights of women but also the plight of the poor, with Carisa all fired up to do good works, and Ryan a socialist in everything but name, with intriguing ideas about human mores and social interaction. Finally the bittersweet ending has a powerful appeal, the suggestion that even Ryan with all her abilities can't always have things her own way, has in her quest for revenge lost far more than she gained. On balance I think I liked it more than not. Just too bad about all the sex.

POSTCARDS FROM TERRI by TONY RICHARDS

Sarob Press hb, 107pp, £22 http://home.freeuk.net/sarobpress/

Terri was the great unrequited love of Steve's student days, the woman who always saw him as just a mate. She went off to travel the world, to find fame and fortune, while he settled down with the more reliable Steph. Every so often over the years postcards would arrive from Terri, sent from exotic locations and detailing fabulous adventures, opening up to Steve vistas of which he can only dream while his own life turns to ash. His job becomes simply a chore and Steph leaves him for another man, but then Terri is killed in an RTA, and in the wake of her passing Steve starts to dream of her obses-sively, vivid dreams in which he visits all the places shown in those postcards and shares her adventures, only each morning he finds the relevant postcard blank, as proof that something remarkable and threatening has entered his life.

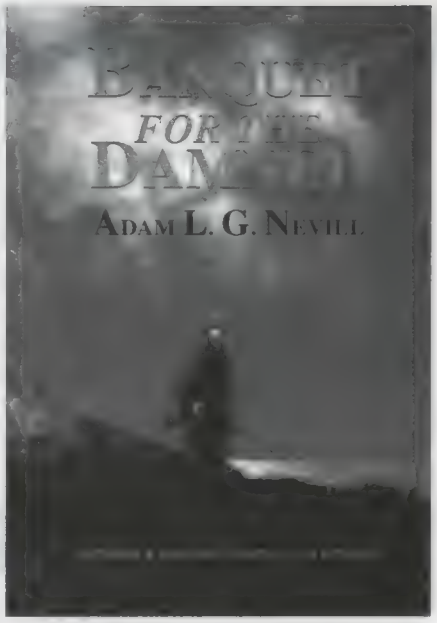
Complete with a brief introduction by Ramsey Campbell, this novella is at heart a ghost story with a touch of voodoo; the familiar tale of spectral possession, here elevated above the ordinary by the unique method in which it is enacted and the depth of characterisation Richards brings to his people. Steve is in many ways the archetypal loser in life, continually bemoaning the one that got away and dreaming of the better life that slipped through his fingers, sacrificing what is for the sake of what might have been. At bottom he is haunted by his own dissatisfaction, and it is this that leaves him vulnerable to something far more terrible. For Terri too the past is a reproach; she had the lifestyle for which Steve yearns and yet it never truly made her happy, so that she ends in drugs and desperation. Part of Richards's achievement here lies in making this femme fatale such a monster and yet also showing us why Steve falls under her spell (and it's not just a matter of physical attraction). This is unashamedly a tale of the supernatural, one with a gradually mounting sense of menace and a carefully laid out plot line, but the strength of the story lies in the reality of the people, the motives and urges that drive them on to act as they do.

DEADFOLK by CHARLIE WILLIAMS
Serpent's Tail pb, 305pp, £7.99 www.serpentstail.com

In the town of Mangel, an insular community in which crime is rife and survival of the fittest rules apply, Royston Blake is a man with an image to maintain. As Head Doorman of Hoppers Wine Bar & Bistro he must command respect, but just lately things have been slipping. The new owner of Hoppers has plans that threaten his job security and the rumours are spreading that Royston has lost his bottle. Women who used to welcome his flirting now take offence and, most ominous of all, his former employers, the Minton brothers, seem to have taken a dislike to Royston. The slide started with the death of his wife in a fire that destroyed Hoppers in its previous incarnation, an act of arson in which Royston's culpability was suspected but never proved by the police. Royston formulates an audacious plan to restore his standing in the community, but of course things go disastrously wrong and before too long Mangel is running up a body count that astonishes even its blasÈ citizens.

This first novel from Charlie Williams is a dark and violent book. Imagine, if you will, the comparatively genteel *Midsomer Murders* transplanted to darkest Somerset and given a delight in excess worthy of Tarantino, the whole dripping with pitch black comedy and panache. Oh, and then tell it in a West Country vernacular. It is the first person narrative that makes the book, drawing the reader in from the get go and, while never becoming someone we might actually like, Royston Blake is a beautifully realised character, someone who is totally believable on his own terms and whose fight to rise above the obstacles that confront him we can identify with, even feel a twinge of empathy as the shit keeps on coming, most of it really not his fault. What in part makes him so credible is his complete and somewhat endearing lack of self awareness; he is, to put it bluntly, rather stupid, though this is not something you would say to his face, but never doubts his superiority to those around him, thus presenting the archetypal hard man as both figure of fun and the embodiment of menace. The plot is satisfyingly complicated without veering into the absurd and made more so by the basic unreliability of the narrator. Some things do grate slightly, such as the inexplicable and constant harping on about how nobody ever leaves Mangel (actually for those like me who think Mangel and then Wurzel, the name itself is a bit problematic) and one unresolved plot detail at the end, but overall this is a compelling and highly enjoyable, albeit not for the squeamish, debut from writer Charlie Williams, who delivers a tour de force exercise in narrative voice and sets those mean streets along which a man must walk in a refreshingly different locale.

BANQUET FOR THE DAMNED by ADAM L.G. NEVILL
PS Publishing hb, 494pp, £35 www.pspublishing.co.uk



The author of several works of erotica under the pseudonym Lindsay Gordon, Nevill moves into the supernatural arena with this superbly crafted novel of terror.

Birmingham based rock star wannabe Dante is at the end of his tether when a letter arrives from Professor Eliot Coldwell, disgraced author of *Banquet for the Damned*, the book that inspired Dante, a man he regards as his philosophical mentor. Coldwell invites Dante to come to St Andrews, where he holds a post on the staff of the university, and work for him as research assistant on a new book. It's an offer Dante can't refuse, and so, with best friend and fellow musician Tom, he sets off for Scotland and a new start, but their arrival coincides with the discovery of a severed arm on the beach and that's just the start of a series of unsettling events. Coldwell, a shadow of the man he expected to meet, doesn't seem especially interested in Dante and leaves him in the care of his other assistant, a strikingly attractive young woman called Beth, for whom Dante immediately forms an attraction and thinks may be the muse he has searched for all his life, though he soon realises that there is something not quite right about the lady. Also new in town is Hart Miller, an authority on sleep disorders who has come to investigate an outbreak of night terrors, but as the evidence mounts Miller realises that a terrible force has been unleashed, an ancient evil intent on destroying St Andrews itself.

Suspension of disbelief is a priority in supernatural fiction and the beautifully engineered plot of this novel, in which all of the pieces slot together perfectly, deftly draws the reader in and leaves him unable to avoid drawing the same conclusions, no matter how fantastic, as those directly involved. As Ramsey Campbell argues in an atypically generous foreword, this is a novel in the tradition of M.R. James, complete with a chilling atmosphere and ever mounting sense of dread, the occasional bloody set piece to make the terror even more real, and the subtle use of occult texts and academic papers to help provide credence for all that takes place. Where Nevill perhaps parts company with James is in the characterisation, with the relationship between Dante and his friend Tom (superficially solid as a rock and the one thing on which Dante can rely in time of danger, but scratch the surface and you find a seething cauldron of animosity and jealousy) set firmly at the heart of the book and driving the narrative forward every bit as much as the supernatural elements of the plot. Nevill's characters are flawed, as in the case of Hart Miller, who has to constantly fight the instinct to run screaming as well as confront his own borderline alcoholism, an echo of Coldwell's problems, but it is the flaws that make these people both interesting and vulnerable to the dangers that lie in wait, as opposed to the atypical Jamesian protagonist whose only vice is an omnivorous curiosity. For over four hundred pages Nevill holds the reader's attention effortlessly and makes us believe the unthinkable, then wraps it up with a showstopper finale in which all hell literally breaks loose and no guarantees that good will triumph. Superbly readable and a delight from first word to last, *Banquet for the Damned* announces the arrival of a major new talent in the field of supernatural fiction, one that should find a sympathetic audience among fans of Jonathan Aycliffe and the early Phil Rickman.

OUT OF MIND by SAM HAYES

Bluechrome pb, 319pp, £7.99 www.bluechrome.co.uk

There are two plot strands here that interact and eventually merge. In one we confront Mackenzie, who is married to Richard, a successful businessman, and has three children. Outwardly her life appears entirely idyllic, but the truth is somewhat less palatable and in a series of flashbacks we learn of Mackenzie's past and the chain of events, the death of one parent and subsequent neglect by the other, which led her to this dreadful state of affairs. Concurrent with this is the story of Katrina, the together and competent friend of Mackenzie's teenage years, the only good person in her life, who is now an inmate in a mental hospital and on a daily basis dealing with a routine every bit as harsh and restrictive as that Mackenzie confronts in her private life. When Katrina manages to escape she turns up on Mackenzie's doorstep, posing as a successful businesswoman looking for a place to stay between house moves and wanting to pick up their friendship, but her arrival is the catalyst for dramatic events and changes in the other woman's life.

This is an exceptional first novel, and one that deserves to find a large audience, a book that merges elements of Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* with Tryon's *The Other*, wrapping it all up in a mainstream sensibility and showing considerable maturity in the way it handles potentially controversial material. In less skilled hands this could have been a common or garden schlocker, with the plot leading up to a telegraphed moment of revelation, but Hayes has the good sense to show what she cannot hide and so instead we get a novel of character, one which plumbs the darker corners of the human psyche. The situation Mackenzie finds herself in, and which her past history has left her believing is no better than she deserves, is undoubtedly shocking and for many this will be an uncomfortable read, but to Hayes' credit there is nothing here that is exploitative; it is the low key and almost casual nature of the cruelties and humiliations Richard inflicts on his wife that make them so realistic. Richard is not a monster heading for meltdown with foam at the mouth and a knife in his hand, but an ordinary guy who seems to have lost sight of where the boundaries are in his relationship, and this recognition of his mundanity, coupled with his wife's apparent compliance, is what makes the novel so disturbing for the reader. The chief author of Mackenzie's woes is her father Gabriel, not a bad man per se, but one who is all too fallible and does bad things, in some sense every bit as much a victim of cruel fate as his daughter; there is no excuse for the way he neglects Mackenzie and yet Hayes does offer us understanding, the possibility that things could have turned out very differently. At the heart of the book is Mackenzie's fight back to health, the backbone of which is the realisation that, simply, she is not to blame; having stopped beating up on herself, she is empowered to stop other people behaving similarly. It's an uplifting and triumphal note on which to end, an effective antidote to the grimness of much that has gone before. *Out of Mind* is not an easy read, with rather more of human nastiness than most of us want to see, but ultimately it celebrates the toughness of the human spirit, the ability to overcome adversity, and I highly recommend the book for the way in which it pulls that off.

MOON BEAVER by ANDREW HOOK

ENC Press pb, 236pp, £9.98 inc p&p www.encpress.com

Benny Henderson is engaged to the woman of his dreams and has a job for life with the Company, an anonymous conglomerate with fingers in each and every pie, which has practically taken over his home city of Norwich, but all the same Benny feels that he is in a rut, with his whole future life mapped out for him. When the charismatic Moon Beaver, a free spirit who seems to embody all the excitement he's missing out on, turns up on his doorstep Benny doesn't hesitate to offer her free B&B. Sex doesn't enter the equation (Benny loves his Louise and has every intention of staying faithful to her), but when Moon asks him to take off and travel the world with her, he does so with hardly a second thought for the job and life he is leaving behind. As a result Louise herself goes through some changes, examining her life and questioning all the things she's previously taken for granted. Intercut with this main strand are two others, one involving Lou, a man from Moon's past and perhaps the true love of her life, but who refused to travel with her and is now having second thoughts, while the third point of the triangle is provided by Christian and Alice, also former acquaintances of Moon and self-styled artists who have compromised their principles to make a killing in the adult entertainment industry.

For long stretches this third strand seems to get side railed completely and receives short shrift when we do return to it, so that I wondered exactly what purpose these scenes really served, other than to secure an '18' rating when the film comes out. A leaner and more focused novel might have resulted had Christian and Alice been omitted. Otherwise, while Andrew Hook is a writer with a strong and distinctive voice, as witness his collection *The Virtual Menagerie*, in this novel, which I suspect is an earlier work, the influence of Tom Robbins, a writer for whom Hook has expressed admiration, is self-evident. There is the same approach to life, a light hearted and joyous celebration of the things that really matter, combined with recognition that we all too often lose sight of them in our attempt to stay on the treadmill. Moon Beaver is, quintessentially, nothing more than a hippy with an expense account and a self belief that enables her to stand firm against the forces of convention, though Hook does look more closely at her motivations and reveals somebody who is essentially a tragic and delusional figure unlike any I can recall from Robbins' oeuvre. Ultimately Moon herself doesn't matter, for all her larger than life qualities; it is her role as a catalyst in the lives of other people, the remarkable effect she has on Benny, Louise and Lou, that makes the novel work. Robbins' influence is even more evident in the laidback prose style, typified by a strong authorial presence and constant invention, an irreverent playfulness with images and concepts, so that simply reading the words on the page is a joyous activity, regardless of any sense they might contain. And while all this half sounds like criticism, that's really not the case. Many early novels seem derivative and if you're going to model your writing on somebody then Robbins is a pretty good choice to make, and I enjoyed *Moon Beaver* a lot more than I did *Half-Asleep in Frog Pyjamas*, the last book I read by the master himself. Bottom line, if you like novels that take risks with narrative and where you don't know what to expect from one page to the next, if you want to read books that are not afraid to tackle the big issues, but do so in a non-portentous way and with a smile on their face, then the sexy and sassy *Moon Beaver* may just be the girl you're looking for.

SOMNAMBULISTS by ALLEN ASHLEY

Elastic Press pb, 190pp, £5.00 www.elasticpress.com

The latest collection from Elastic Press showcases the work of one of the most respected and widely published writers in the UK independent press, which is not to say that everything here is a pearl beyond price. In particular, regardless of the fact that it was first published in TTA itself and is an important part of the author's oeuvre, lead story 'Somme-Nambula' is a tale of hell in the WWI trenches that for me didn't quite work. The author's trademark collage style is put to use, with incidents of life during wartime intercut with scenes of civvy street, in particular reminiscences about a vaudeville mesmerist and magician, the narrative gaining an everything but the kitchen sink quality as it develops, with snatches of rhyme, songs, wartime propaganda and even a naff hands across time encounter with American troops fighting in the first Gulf War thrown into the mix. While most of the episodes are well written and on occasion genuinely moving there are also moments, such as a superior officer asking the hero's advice on dealing with homosexuals in the ranks, when the arch campness of the *Carry On* films rather than *All Quiet on the Western Front* comes to mind and ultimately, the metaphor of troops as sleepwalkers in no-man's land aside, all we get is the banality of war is hell and universality of suffering for which, from a narrative perspective, something conventional would have worked just as well or better. Elsewhere we get the tediously brief and briefly tedious 'Oh Four' which appears to be included simply to bump the page count and has nothing to offer except love as a four letter word, while 'The Locust People' is a fusion of Carpenter's *Them* and David Icke, with crazy cults and monsters masquerading as humans and right wing politics, the quality of the writing distracting from the fact that the writer really doesn't seem to know where to go with it or, at the least, has gone somewhere this reviewer can't follow.

But enough negativity. There are sixteen stories here, and generally speaking they're of a quality to reward the reader and justify the laurels placed on Ashley's head by past reviewers, including myself. As an example take the droll and witty 'Sequence', with its protagonist sucked into the reality of a B movie and getting to see what happens to the hero and his girlfriend after the alien invaders have been sent packing, a feat of audacity and invention worthy of the great Howard Waldrop, blending real life and artifice to the betterment of both. Satire, another of Ashley's strong suits, comes to the fore in 'Pumpkin Coach', an irreverent and highly amusing retelling of the Princess Diana story in the form of a fairy story filtered through the media, which throws into sharp relief both the mythic qualities of those events and our own obsession with celebrity. Equally satirical, but of a more savage and Swiftian bent, 'Downsize' gives us an entirely literal interpretation of this euphemism from the world of business, with dedicated company men and women submitting to a shrinking process to keep their jobs in a harsh economic climate. Unhappy and failed relationships are another Ashley staple and there's plenty of those to be found in the pages of this book, such as the protagonist of 'Saurian', who manages to revive the flames of a love gone cold through the expedient of wearing a dinosaur costume, a story about serious matters that benefits from not taking itself seriously, in fact embraces absurdity with the author showing enviable skill in delineating the character of his engaging loser in love and providing a heart-warming resolution. Similarly in 'Life Under Water' we get Pete (ahem) another young guy who's screwed up in the romance stakes, flying solo at a party and desperately trying to connect with some very unusual women, a blend of *Sex and the City* pizzazz with something distinctly weird, and all of it good. For 'In Search of Guy Fawkes', a marvellously inventive confection in which the hero must pursue his quest for true love in a modern world affianced to the Elizabethan Age, imagine *Shakespeare in Love* as filmed by the director of *Jubilee*. And then there's 'Siberia', probably my favourite Ashley story to date, classily overlapping personal emotion with speculation about spirituality and our place in some greater scheme of things, as a man who is part of an expedition in search of God's tomb must also confront the reality of his own shortcomings in reaching out to another human being, the two strands combining and playing off of each other to offer a compelling picture of human nullity.

Ashley is a writer who takes risks, but with *Somnambulists* I suspect Elastic Press are on to a sure thing.

WEIRDMONGER by D.F. LEWIS

Prime pb, 383pp, $19.95 www.pspublishing.co.uk

This is billed as 'A Retrospective Showcase of Work by D.F. Lewis', and while 67 stories might seem a tad extravagant to some it is actually rather restrained when set against the total body of the author's published work of over 1500 stories. Just reading the list of credits at the end of the book is like stepping into a museum of the Small Press, a treasure house of magazines and anthologies now all gone to some far better place and living on only as names from yesteryear in the appendices of collections like this. Yep, reading *Weirdmonger* is gonna make you feel nostalgic as hell.

For me the defining characteristic of Lewis's work has always been that he is a writer who is in love with words, intoxicated with the possibilities of language, and while that claim could be made of almost any worker on the pit face of modern fiction the stories in *Weirdmonger* hint at a concern beyond the simple matter of moving the narrative along. Here is a character in one of Lewis's stories talking about his father, 'From him I inherited the everpresent search for the exact words to describe things. Language for him was the placing of idiosyncratic and little used words upon a potter's wheel and moulding them beyond their meanings.' Reading this in the greater context of Lewis's oeuvre, the almost obsessive productivity that typified his heyday, it is easy to believe that the author is also referencing himself, the quest that incessantly drives him on. At the sentence level I can think of few writers whose command of their craft is greater, with each word carefully chosen to fit in with the whole, a remarkable feat considering the sheer volume of his work, and each image a dazzling gem to beguile and enchant, disturb or alarm. It is perhaps best to approach *Weirdmonger* as you would a volume of poetry, delighting in the descriptions, the quality of thought and emotion that is conveyed.

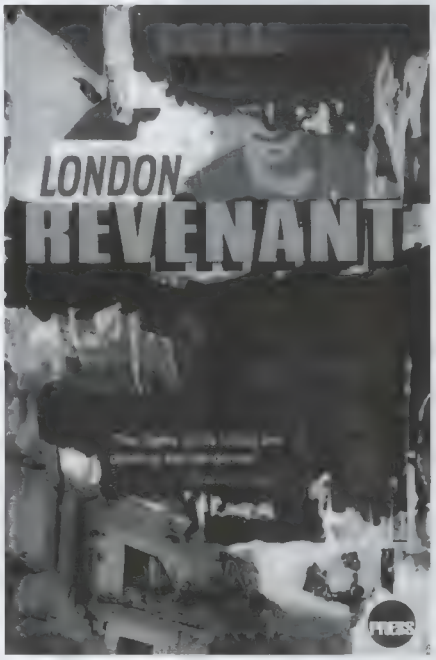
The main problem I have with his work, and certainly it's not endemic, is to do with the plotting. Yes, it is possible to follow most of his stories in a linear progression, a chain of cause and effect, and yet there is often a contrived feel to it, a sense that things do not happen like this in life and what we are seeing

is the random in action, so that you could maybe, in one of the longer stories, turn past a page and not even notice what you've missed. Of course the random nature of events could be seen simply as art imitating life and yet I feel a certain rationality is at work here, the logic of the dream and nightmare. The defining quality of those internal psychodramas is their brevity, with the suspension of disbelief destroyed at any greater length. Similarly, with *Weirdmonger*, for me it was the shorter stories that worked best. To take just one example, 'The Christmas Angel' is a mere two pages long, but within that distance it sets the scene perfectly, with a lushness and eye for detail that completely enthrals the reader, only to then deliver an ending that is as shocking as it is appropriate. It is at this length that Lewis is a master and *Weirdmonger* contains many such small gems, bringing to mind nothing so much as the arch weirdness of *Eraserhead* sliced up and fricasseed by Lord Dunsany. Lewis may well be an acquired taste, but one well worth cultivating and for those who wish to do so this is an ideal introduction to his oeuvre, though I do recommend a cautious approach, dipping into the book and sampling its delights piecemeal, rather than attempting to swallow it all down at once.

LONDON REVENANT by CONRAD WILLIAMS
The Do-Not Press pb, 331pp, £7.99 www.thedonotpress.com

A serial killer is murdering people on the London underground, pushing them into the paths of speeding trains, and Adam Buckley thinks he knows who the maniac is, a strange and bestial man he saw one night while walking home. Adam is on the periphery of a group of people who are exploring the backwaters of London and discovering the secret places that the city keeps to itself, but with the hint that such knowledge is both its own reward and also a terrible burden. He suffers from narcolepsy, falling asleep at the most inconvenient of moments, a condition that has jinxed his ability to be just like other people, with a career and romantic relationships, but there is the suggestion of something more, that Adam is not really unconscious at such times but has another life in which he is Monck, the member of a tribe existing in the subterranean levels beneath London and in search of a fabled place of sanctuary for their kind. In this alternate scheme of things The Pusher is a renegade member of the tribe who has gone above ground and now threatens to expose them through his murderous actions, which Monck has been sent to stop, though there is a danger that he too has been beguiled by life on the surface.

This is a beautifully written book, as one would expect from Williams, with the characters perfectly realised and the setting described in terms that bring London to vivid life, making the city a character itself, secretive and mysterious, with all kinds of joys and dangers held close to its chest. About the plot though I'm in two minds. The idea of a secret race living in the wainscoting of our own society is a familiar one (e.g. Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere* or Christopher Fowler's *Roofworld*), but Williams doesn't quite do enough work to make either the concept or Adam's double life seem entirely plausible, while with the apocalyptic events at the book's finale he gives in to the temptation for a grand, over the top gesture, reminiscent of the train crash that terminated the otherwise low key *Head Injuries*, though with somewhat more justification in this instance and greater subtlety in the rendition. And yet, regardless of any misgivings I might have, there is a sense in which this shifting tapestry with all its uncertainties is entirely appropriate. Monck/Adam is an unreliable narrator, most of the time not sure himself what is going on and, with some of the most gripping sequences revealed as dreams, the possibility can't be ruled out that we are meant to take all this as hallucinatory. In the end it comes back to the sheer quality of the writing. While one might wish for a more obviously cohesive plot and a little less ambiguity, all the minutiae of Adam's existence, the tone of voice of the people in his life, deft touches of detail such as the way in which his presence kills flowers, the drink, drugs and casual sex culture of which he is a part, are all perfectly rendered on the page and so I can't help but like this book, though I wish I understood it more. It is every bit as much of a mystery, as multi-faceted and fascinating, by turns captivating and infuriating, glamorous and undeniably grim, as the city which it celebrates, and perhaps that, if any, is the point Williams is trying to make, that contradiction is rooted in the heart of us all and in everything we create, be it a city or a novel.



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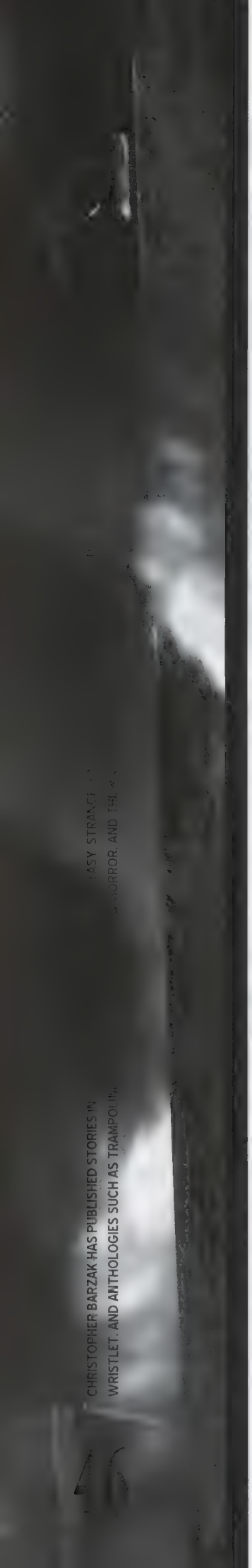
Talk to Peter Tennant about his book reviews or his own fiction on TTA's online discussion forum: www.ttapress.com/discus



A Resurrection Artist

STORY BY CHRISTOPHER BARZAK • ILLUSTRATION BY JOACHIM LUETKE

Lying here in this abandoned hotel, I have done it once again. Once every year or so, depending on my finances, I allow myself to die. It's a way of life, a means to an end, or an end to life as a way of surviving. Any way you look at it, my body is a miracle.

Now comes the burning sensation of re-entry, as I find myself returning to my body, a tingling that grows to feel like fire. Every cell expands, flooding with electricity, then my eyes blink over and over, making adjustments to reality and to the grade of light. After that, I begin to see the people around me clearly. Their faces peer down, curious, amazed.

This audience has been the eighth group to kill me.

It was a thrill for them, I'm sure, even though some of them have already seen me do this. I'm developing a following. Times are rough though, Jan constantly tells me. Jan is my manager. She's my sister, too. Improvisation, she advises, spins on old ideas, variations on a theme, are what's needed to keep this act alive.

This act can't die, though, even if I tried. Like the cat, I have nine lives. More than nine, most likely, but there's always a chance something unpredictable could happen. So far, Jan and I haven't figured out how to mess up death.

CHRISTOPHER BARZAK HAS PUBLISHED STORIES IN [illegible] EASY STRANGE, HORROR, AND THE WRISTLET. AND ANTHOLOGIES SUCH AS TRAMPOLINE.

A young man wearing a dark suit says, "I can't believe it. This isn't happening." I cough and spit up blood on my fingers. There's a gold ring bound around one of my knuckles that wasn't there when I died. This must be what I brought back this time. I try to recall how they killed me, but can only remember in pieces: a burn under my ribs where a knife slid in, the jolt of a gunshot splitting my chest open, my eyes flooding with blood.

"Believe," Jan tells them. I follow her voice to find her kneeling beside me. Jan waves her hand over the length of my body, from head to toe. "You did it yourselves," she says. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is his body, his arms, his legs, his head and torso. You've kept vigil beside him since the moment of death. I hope you're all satisfied with the experience."

There's this old lady who narrows her eyes to slits when Jan says this. "I'm not so sure," she says. "I mean, I *know* he died. We saw the heart monitor, the flat line. But, well, now that he's alive again, it just doesn't seem fair."

A typical reaction. She didn't pay for a resurrection; she wanted the death.

But we have their money, ten thousand dollars a person, and there are eight of them. We keep the groups small since outings like this – a killing instead of a suicide – are illegal. Hence the abandoned hotel, once known as The Flamingo. The carpet, the striped wallpaper, the floor of the drained pool, everything here is pink.

"Mrs Bertrand," Jan says, "you just witnessed a miracle. My little brother, just twenty-three years old, allowed you to kill him so he could return to us from death. How can you be disappointed?"

Mrs Bertrand sniffles. "Oh yes," she says. "I know. I wasn't really complaining. Don't mind me."

Jan smiles. Mrs Bertrand smiles. The rest of the killers smile. I try to, but only manage a weak sneer.

"Well," Jan says, "that was almost profitable." She's sitting at a little table in the corner of the room. Calculator and computer notebook out, spreadsheet of our budget glowing onscreen. The killers have left, have said their goodbyes, their goodnights, have given me their best regards. I'm still naked and bloody, although the blood is dry by now.

"Why *almost* profitable? Eighty thousand. That's a good haul."

"It will keep our heads above water," says Jan. She grimaces, taps her teeth with one long red fingernail. "Aiden," she says, looking at me in her serious way. "You can't go so long between exhibitions. It's been almost two years since your last one. People forget about you if you don't give them what they want. Eighty thousand won't get us through the next two years. And besides, you shouldn't be so lazy. Dad raised us to work hard. We should honor his memory."

Goosebumps begin to pop up on my legs. I look down to find something very like a beetle crawling across the hairs on my thigh. It has a red V-shaped mark on its black, hard-shelled back. I position my fingers next to it, flick it across the room. It lands on its back beside Jan's foot, waving its legs in the air.

"Gross," says Jan. "Why don't you take a shower?"

"There's no water in here," I say.

"Well put your clothes on and find some. You're a goddamned mess."

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I'm a goddamned mess, I'm a goddamned mess. God damned, maybe; a mess, definitely. Jan has no tact, no consideration with words. She thinks they are so innocent, something you can take for granted, so she uses them without thinking. She's comfortable with clichés. I, on the other hand, am a little more than wary. Too often I find myself victimized by an overused phrase. *You're a goddamned mess.* I'm certain Jan didn't think out the alternative meanings of this one.

But I'm showering, I'm washing off the second skin of dried blood. This, I think, must be something like afterbirth, how a nurse wipes it off of a newborn's skin. I'm appreciative of YMCAs now more than ever. A hot shower, long and steam-heavy. There's nothing like it to make me feel fresh and new again.

"Jesus, what happened to you?" a man says beside me. He's soaping his hairy chest, looking me up and down. He walked in a few minutes after me. Though I've washed off most of the blood, a few fresh scars remain. Those will take a week or so to heal.

"Car accident," I tell him. "Head-on, couple of years ago."

"No kidding," he says, lathering his underarms.

"I was lucky," I say. "I wasn't even wearing a safety belt."

"Shit," he says. "You *are* lucky, buddy."

I nod in this way that makes me look like I feel really lucky. Someone like him would appreciate a nod like that, I think. You can't ever be sure of what someone else wants, but I can't help but try to anticipate. This time I've anticipated correctly. The guy gives me a sympathetic shake of his head, an I-feel-for-you-buddy face, but it only manages to disturb me.

I look away, tip my head back, and fill my mouth with hot water.

It wasn't always such a bother. Resurrection, I mean. For quite some time it was a necessary, meaningful part of my life. Once upon a time it defined my entire being. If I couldn't resurrect, I wondered, who would I be? Most likely I would have a wallet with pictures of a wife and children inside it, credit cards, a driver's license, and a decent amount of money. These articles, then, would have defined my one, singular life. But I can't allow myself to think of the pleasures of banality. Sometimes the quotidian can drive me wild with envy and fear.

The first time I died, I was fifteen. We'd buried my father two months earlier. I'd been crying a lot, or else sleeping, and often I'd chew my nails to the quick. One day I hung myself from our staircase banister. My mother found me and, you can imagine, some hysteria ensued from there.

She got me down, though, with Jan's help. Jan was going to college at the time, majoring in business, but I'd had the decency to hang myself at Christmas, when I knew she'd be home to help my mother unhinge me.

My neck was broken. I can remember the snap, the grind of bone, and the awful copper taste that filled my throat. Then I fainted, then I stopped breathing. Mom and Jan had been out shopping. When they returned, arms strung with department store bags, I'd been dead for several hours.

If they hadn't been so overwhelmed by shock, they might have called the police or an ambulance, and I might have resurrected under the blare of sirens. Instead, my mother sobbed over my broken body while Jan comforted her. They found a thick, leather-bound book clenched in my hand, my fingers

curled stiffly around its spine. The pages were blank, so they didn't know what to make of it. Shouldn't it have held my reasons for dying? It was the first thing I brought back with me, though. A few hours later, I woke up and asked how their day had been.

Jan slapped me. Jan slaps hard. She was so angry at first. Then after my mother came round from her faint and cheered up a bit, Jan had one of her brilliant ideas. Those loans of hers, my mother's debts, my dead father's unpaid hospital bills. If I could do it some more, this death trick, we could make a pretty penny. At the time I thought that could be a good side benefit. But really I was feeling for the first time in my life that I'd found something a little like myself.

My mother was against it. She flat out refused. This was a miracle, she insisted, not a talent. Things like this happen for a reason. Not over and over, like sitcom reruns.

Jan nodded and said she was sorry. But later, after our mother went to sleep, she led me into the bathroom and said, "We're going to get to the bottom of this."

She filled the bathtub with warm water and told me to get in. "What for?" I asked, folding my arms across my chest, suddenly chilly.

Jan frowned. Tears filled her eyes. "Do this for me, Aidan." She looked at the tiled floor and wiped away her tears.

I got into the tub and the water soaked through my jeans and T-shirt. Jan knelt on the floor beside me. She took my wrists, one after the other, and slid a razor up them gently. Blood pulsed out, but the tub caught it. It caught all of my blood for the rest of the night.

"I have an idea," says Jan. She's cleaned up the hotel room, destroyed the evidence. Not that the proprietors of the Flamingo will be returning. She's standing in front of a sliding glass door that opens onto a balcony. You don't have to open it to get out, though. The glass is shattered, so you can step right through. She points a finger in the air beside her ear, like a light bulb lighting.

"What?" I say.

"We go global," says Jan. "I've built you that web page, but I don't think we've been using it to its full potential."

"Which would be?"

"Something big," says Jan. She paces back and forth in a square of sunlight falling through the sliding door. The web page she built has what I've named a 'Diery' on it. It's a journal of sorts, chronicling my deaths. I write my entries in the leather-bound book I brought back the first time I died, then Jan loads them onto the site. The Diery entries are the only thing I have to do with the web page; Jan does the rest. She says I have a way with words, but let her take care of business.

"How big is big?" I ask.

"We advertise for a grand finale," says Jan. "We say it's your last appearance. Then the appointments come pouring in. It'll be like when some barely recognized painter dies and his paintings suddenly become worth something. I'm a genius, I know, you don't have to say so."

"But that would be lying," I say. "You know I'll just come back."

"Oh shit, Aiden, no one will give a damn if we give them a good enough ending. Lighten up."

I write:

Dear Diery,

There is only one other sensation like death available: orgasm. The French call it la petite mort, *the little death. It's that brief moment during climax when everything is burned away from consciousness and a person feels a part of their self break off, snap in half, shatter into a thousand pieces.*

Resurrection, like everything else, can be a form of art. I do my best to keep my dying pure, to make it something special. It's a highwire act without a net, or skating on melting ice. You fall through, you drown in that dark place. It's the ascension, when you resurface, when your head breaks the water, when you gasp for air again, that elevates the fall itself to something grander. Somehow you've survived.

It sounds as though it's done for audiences alone, but this is not true. It's the flare of recognition, the shock of being seen in such a vulnerable state, the cries of believers and unbelievers when I come round that thrills me back into my bone and blood. "A miracle!" they shout, even though they've murdered me as best as they know how.

I try to write:

This was the first time I allowed myself to be murdered by strangers; it was also the last. Not having control of the situation, not being the one to take my own life is too horrible to repeat.

Resurrection isn't New Age or mystical. It's not something connected with people who migrate to be near the UFO infested desert skies of New Mexico. No aliens, no chakras, no spells, no crystals or runes will be found upon my person.

Resurrection is an art, not a movement. It's not something anyone can decide to do. And what I must be clear about is that I'm not someone that requires faith or belief. I'm no messiah, nor do my travels between death and life mean much beyond that event in and of itself. My deaths and rebirths remind others of their own forgotten lives. We all die, but we do not all resurrect. Herein lies a profound difference.

But Jan deletes this section. She says she will only publish entries that carry positive messages. "This stuff about being murdered," she says, "it's just too bleak. And as for the rest, talking negatively about certain groups of people, ie New Age followers and UFO cults, you just can't do that, Aiden. Don't alienate part of your audience."

"I was trying to explain," I say. "What I experience. What I know."

"Don't worry about things like that," says Jan. "That's not something anyone wants to hear anyway."

Jan is all secrets and mystery. She's rented me a room at an upscale hotel. She sends me an allowance every week. "You deserve it, baby brother," she says. "Live it up for a while, hear?"

"Thanks, Jan," I say, even though I'm bursting with suspicion.

She calls every day to make sure I'm having fun, eating well, seeing the sights. She emphasizes my having fun a lot, then her conversations shrivel. "You only live once," she says without thinking, and all I can do is nod.

Jan's very busy, she tells me, planning the big day. I think about how the *big day* is a phrase used by women concerning someone else's wedding. I wonder if Jan has managed to meet someone she desperately loves, who she intends to marry. I remember the gold ring I brought back when I died at the Flamingo. She could use it for the wedding. She could have it fitted.

"How are preparations?" I ask. I'm sitting on my bed, watching a show with lots of ambulances and police cars. Outside, framed by my window, a palm tree sways in a breeze.

"Fine," says Jan. "Don't worry about a thing."

I say okay but decide to push for details. "What *are* the plans this time?"

"Mother's going to visit soon," says Jan. Then she tells me she has calls to make, people to meet. The phone clicks, then the tone of disconnection floods the line. I slowly put the phone back on its cradle.

On the television, sirens are blaring.

Knock, knock.

"Who's there?" I ask, fitting my eye to the peep hole.

It's Mother. She's standing in the hallway, wearing a lemon yellow power suit as if she were a thirty year old businesswoman instead of fifty and happily out of work. I pull the door open and she thrusts a package at me. "Here, love," she says. I take the package and set it on the nightstand to open later.

"So what brings you here, Mom?" I ask. It's not often that I see her. Soon after we discovered my talent, Jan rigged it so Mom took out a large insurance policy. Then I stepped off a curb and was smashed by a bus. There was a dead body, so the insurance company had to pay up. I lost my legal identity, but we were able to give Mom lots of money. Now she spends most of her time in the air, flying from the Caribbean to Europe to Asia. She took care of my father before he died – stomach cancer – so we felt she deserved a rest.

"I need an excuse to visit my boy?" she says. "Is that what you're saying?"

"No, Mom," I laugh. I stuff my hands in my pockets and stare at my bare feet. The carpet here is almond, not pink like the Flamingo, which pleases me.

She hugs me but doesn't have time to chat. She has a plane to catch. "I hear you and Jan are planning a last performance?"

"Jan's planning it," I correct. "I'm sitting here, wondering what she's planning."

"Well, dear, Jan is very good at these things. Just let her take care of it. You should get out while you're here, have some fun. Live a little."

I look up quickly when she says this. For a moment I think she's Jan.

"What?" she says. "Why are you looking at me like that?! Oh, Aiden, you're too flighty. Take a pill."

I don't mention that I once took a lot of pills. That exhibition paid off my father's hospital bills. But I don't say anything because only one person is allowed to be a martyr, the same way no two objects can occupy the same space at the same time. I abdicate to my mother whenever possible; if I didn't, she'd steal the role. She has a story she tells about my father's funeral. At the dinner afterwards, at the church, she looked up from her plate of food and saw herself in a mirror across the room. She was sitting in the middle of a long table, Jan on one side, me on the other, a flock of relatives stretched out beside us. Her head was tilted to one side. She saw that she looked unimaginably hurt. "Betrayed," is how she puts it, and knew right then how it was for Jesus at the Last Supper. "That poor man," she says, "always trying to help others, and what did he get? He should have learned. I have."

After she's flown away, I open her gift. It's a glass globe and inside it is a miniature island village, palm trees staked at each corner of the island. It looks like it would be a hot place. I shake it and snow falls over the village. Snowflakes pile up on the palm leaves. There's a card, too, with an inscription: 'Saw this and thought of you, dear. Had to buy it. Hope your grand finale goes off well. Alas, I won't be attending. Those things are so gruesome. Hugs, Mom.'

I sit on the end of the bed and put my head in my hands and try not move or to make any sounds. If I can do that, I can do anything. It takes a few minutes, but I finally begin to not feel my own body. Then I can't hear, then I can't see either. It's a difficult task, but it helps to burn through the hours of waiting.

"It's time," says Jan. She's arrived wearing a black leather outfit and too much perfume. Already the room's begun to smell like a Chanel factory and I can't stop thinking there's a cat burglar going through my closet instead of my sister.

"Time?" I say. "Time?"

"To go," Jan says. "There's a limo waiting."

"A limo?" I feel my eyebrows furrow.

"A limo," says Jan. "Can't you respond with anything but questions? Saying 'hi' never occurred to you? We have to go."

So we go. As we leave Jan stops and pays the bill, says we won't be returning. She tips the manager twenty dollars and he says it's been a pleasure. Come back soon.

The limo is long and sleek, a black bullet waiting by the curbside. Evening light flickers over it. Inside it's coolly air-conditioned, a relief from the heat. I sit on one seat and Jan sits on the one opposite. She mixes herself a drink. Then she pulls a pack of cigarettes from her purse and shuffles one out, lights it, inhales as though she's drinking water. I watch the column of her throat move and imagine the smoke traveling down into her lungs, the nicotine sifting into her blood, calming her.

"Since when do you smoke?"

"I've been under a lot of stress lately, okay?" She runs her fingers through her hair. "It wasn't easy, arranging things for tonight."

"So what *are* the plans for tonight?"

Jan smiles, satisfied with herself, and lifts her whiskey to her lips. "Tonight," she says, "we are giving the greatest show on earth. Nothing can top this. But I'd rather not tell you what it is just yet. Your own surprise will heighten the audience's reaction. They've paid quite a bit of money." Jan rubs her thumb and forefinger together. "These people are the *crème de la crème*."

"I don't know about this," I say. "I mean – "

"What?" Jan interrupts. "Just what do you mean, Aiden? What's not to know? This is it. You can't wimp out now."

I nod and nod. I know, Jan. I didn't mean anything by it, Jan. I tell her the usual things to smooth her over, then pour myself a whiskey and drink it in one swallow.

We arrive at dusk at an abandoned warehouse near the ocean. I can't see any water, but I hear waves collapsing on a beach. Salt scents the air. Jan and I make our way toward the little door that opens into the warehouse.

The parking lot is filled to capacity with automobiles, buses, taxis. On the horizon I glimpse a sliver of red lowering itself

THE INSIDE OF THE WAREHOUSE IS LIT BY HUNDREDS OF CANDLES. BLEACHERS HAVE BEEN ERECTED. AND IN THE CENTER OF EVERYTHING, SOMETHING STANDS SHROUDED IN A RED VELVET CURTAIN.

down to the other side of the world. Amber light darkens by the minute. Jan puts her hand on my back, guiding me toward the entrance. She whispers words of encouragement, and between her words and the amber light, a memory of my father surfaces.

It was when he was still healthy, before he was sick; or if he was sick, no one knew it. The cancer was still a secret buried in his flesh. We were sitting outside, catching our breath after a jog together. The sun was bright in our eyes. Clouds would pass over and the world would be covered in shadow, then this amber light would return. It went on like that, light then dark, light then dark, and finally my father told me people don't always have a choice in the matter of things like light or dark, or living or dying. But they have to make decisions when choices can be made. He put my face in his hands and held me together. I almost cried at what he was saying. I knew. I knew right then what he was saying.

It was afterwards, after his dying, then after my own, that I forgot.

Jan swings the door open and a blast of heat hits me. The inside of the warehouse is lit by hundreds of candles. Bleachers have been erected. And in the center of everything, something stands shrouded in a red velvet curtain. As we walk in, the audience begins to cheer.

They are spectacularly beautiful tonight, wearing tuxedoes and gowns and jewels. A small, nut brown woman with a red dot on her forehead brushes her hand against me as I pass her. A touch, just a touch, to feel my power, maybe it will rub off, they think. And if it doesn't, let him die, he deserves it, keeping a talent like that to himself. Who does he think he is?

A good question. But already Jan's voice is filling the warehouse, interrupting me from my own answer. She uses a microphone to introduce me. "The one, the only, the Resurrection Artist!" she shouts. "The only one known to be alive at this time." She laughs at her attempt at humor. Some of the audience chuckles. They'll laugh to grease her wheels, anything to get this show moving.

Two heavily muscled men wearing tuxedoes stand on either side of the red velvet curtain, each holding onto a braided gold rope. Jan turns to them and shouts, "Here is the medium of death," and the men pull on the rope until the shroud lifts to reveal a large kiln with a fire roaring inside it. One of the men swings its gate open, a gate large enough for a man to step inside. The fire lifts and enlarges.

Jan motions for me to approach, and slowly I do. Each step is like walking through water though, that slow trudge, but finally I stand before it, thinking, Is this what I am about to do? What about my body? If it burns, will I still resurrect? Do I need a body to return to? I've always had one before, even if it *was* bloody and battered.

The audience rises to its feet. When they stand to cheer I feel as if I should be in the Coliseum, preparing to battle a lion. Or in the corner of a boxing ring with an announcer introducing the opponents. I'm in one corner, but who is in the other?

I look into the kiln, that gold and red waiting for my body, and see Jan. Then it isn't Jan, but my mother standing in the fire, then my dead father, his eyes sunk and hollow, his flesh white and mushroom rotten. I see the reflection of the audience cheering behind me. Then I don't see any of them, but myself walking out, licks of flame rolling off my skin.

Ding, ding, ding. We stare and stare at each other, then move toward the center of the ring, our fists ready.

I turn to find Jan running back and forth in front of the bleachers, waving her hands madly, stirring the crowd into a frenzy. She's good at that. I wait until she turns her face to me, a brief moment of attention, and say, "Call it off."

Jan's eyes narrow. She taps a finger to her ear: *What did you say?*

I repeat myself slowly so she can read my lips, and as she begins to understand, a shadow spreads over her face. She marches over, puts an arm around my shoulder, says, "Aiden, what the hell do you think you're doing? These people have already paid."

"Send them away," I tell her. "Tell them I'm not dying any more. Whatever it takes, you can handle it. You're good at things like that."

"You little – I ought to kill you myself." Jan removes her arm and points a finger in my face. "How could you? How else are you going to live?"

To live. Isn't that the question? How to live? I've never answered it. I only know how to die. How to wait until the next death.

"I don't know," I tell her. "But I want to find out."

Jan folds her arms across her chest and shakes her head, astonished. I don't flinch, although something in me wants to. I walk away and step out into the night. The audience titters and whispers. "What is going on here?" one woman shouts.

I shut the door behind me and walk to the back of the building, sit down among shattered beer bottles. My legs stretch out in front of me and I stare at them, thinking, Those are my legs. I find them more interesting than I probably should.

Within an hour, the crowd disperses. The car engines turn over, the tires peel, the annoyed voices disappear. Finally, Jan finds me around back. "Are you proud of yourself?" she asks. After a moment of consideration, I nod. "Well, I hope you're happy. I am no longer your sister. And don't think Mother won't hear about this. What would Dad say?" She tsks.

She walks away, but I'm not concerned with her any longer. Jan will forgive me if it's possible. And if it isn't, then we had good times. She can't ask for more than that.

Suddenly I see a figure lurching toward me from the next lot over. After a moment the figure becomes a man, and then he stops, his tennis shoes scraping the asphalt next to me.

"You see the resurrection?" he asks, scratching his face.

"There wasn't one," I tell him. "It didn't go off."

"That's too bad. I wanted to see it. Something like that, the power to come back to life – I wonder what it's like. But that chick I phoned for tickets was asking way too much."

He's grunged out, the knees in his jeans ripped, a bruise on one cheek, a cut on his forehead. "Why would you want to see that?" I ask. "It isn't the most pleasant thing to see a person dying."

"It's the comeback," he says. "That's what's appealing." He coughs and lights a cigarette. The end glows red then orange in the dark.

The comeback, I think. Yes, that's it. Life, life. The beat of a heart, the break of a wave on the beach. What a plunge. What a lark to live for even one day.

"It isn't too late," I tell him. His face screws up, his nose wrinkles as if he's smelled something peculiar.

I lead him into the warehouse where the candles have been doused, the bleachers emptied of human breathing. The kiln still glows, though. "Here is your resurrection," I tell him, not your death. I move toward the kiln's mouth, fidgety and nervous, wondering what those flames hold. I imagine myself a skeleton that turns to ash, then to dust. I open the gate and the fire breathes heavy on me, a welcoming kiss.

I tell myself that when I return this time, I will be a bird of fire, holding a rose in my beak. I will lower my head before him, this audience of one, whose face glows from the nearness of the flames, whose skin flushes from my body's heat. And maybe, just maybe, he'll say it was terrible to see me burning, but also somehow beautiful. Not a rush, but a moment of grace. I will bow to him then, and begin again. This time for keeps. I will lay the rose at his feet.

ENGLAND: YEAR ZERO

DAVID PEACE INTERVIEWED

ANDREW HEDGECOCK

To read David Peace is to be lured into a minefield of baleful collective memory and daunting personal reflection. His bleak, feverishly imagined and angry novels are exhausting evocations of the appalling spectres and ugly spectacles of the 1970s and 1980s – an era when the British psyche slid into the ooze of corruption, apathy and callous self-interest from which it has still to surface.

Peace's 'Red Riding Quartet' consists of four visceral, disturbing and complex crime novels (*Nineteen Seventy-four*, *Nineteen Seventy-seven*, *Nineteen Eighty* and *Nineteen Eighty-three*) set in West Yorkshire in the 1970s and early 1980s. At their heart is the hunt for the Yorkshire Ripper and its fallout.

The plotting is labyrinthine, the language densely poetic, the narrative fragmented and – at times – surreal. Peace takes risk with content – a reviewer on Amazon.co.uk describes *Nineteen Seventy-four* as 'disturbed to the point of insanity, sickening to the point of physical nausea'. He experiments with form and style too: *Nineteen Eighty*, for example, includes a series of 'transmissions' – stream of consciousness interludes between chapters, in which the voices, or psychic emanations, of killer and dead victims overlap.

He's been compared to James Ellroy, Brett Easton Ellis and David Lynch: his work is a synthesis of the American 'hardboiled' tradition, classic urban horror and – as suggested by the collective title of the quartet – dark fairy tale. But to pigeonhole these books as 'literary noir' is to fail to engage with the author's concerns. Peace approaches his work with a degree of rigour, integrity and social engagement seldom witnessed since the passing of the golden age of political theatre.

He sees the crime novel as a medium for social comment, asserting that crimes define our lives and times. And he's often made the case against the introduction of humour (however bleak) into crime. Behind every narrative, he argues, are victims; the victims' friends and families; and a perpetrator's friends and family: it's a genre where writers have deep obligations to the events that inspire them, however loosely. It's not just the raw horror of Peace's writing that reclaims crime as a fictional form for adults: it's the way his stories advance, unflinchingly, to inescapable conclusions about the moral bankruptcy of modern societies. The unifying theme of his five books to date is the effect of the contemporary retreat from politics and spiritual belief in creating a crueller, more dangerous world for us to inhabit.

Peace acknowledges his obsession with the desolation and alienation of modern urban life – particularly life in northern England – but he doesn't let it define him. When I ask how he copes with immersing himself in the psychological deterioration of his characters and the disintegration of the soul of Britain, his answer is refreshingly straightforward: "The traditional ways – drink and football."

But he's a writer for whom crime can never provide escapist entertainment – it has to deal with the social and political forces that provide the context for its violent and transgressive acts. And, on one level, the Red Riding Quartet is a journey into a socio-political heart of darkness. It's the story of how a far from perfect way of life, but one based on a fragile tradition of mutual aid, was gradually infected with the aggression, shallowness and greed that have come to define it today.

"My view of life in contemporary Britain is essentially pessimistic," Peace tells me. "And that pessimism is further fuelled every time I switch on the TV, click on the Internet, or venture out of the house. I recommend the avoidance of all three. That way you'll not suffer disappointment and anger that things did not get better after 1997.

"The majority of the population still work in the least protected and most underpaid jobs in Western Europe. They live in fear of malicious unemployment benefits and miserable state pensions, cared for by a chronically under-funded health service and protected by an inept police force that clears up only 18% of all crime. Meanwhile, Her Majesty's Government turn a blind eye, or a greased palm, to the £85 billion in lost tax channelled into offshore havens."

Peace left Britain to live and work in Istanbul soon after the 1992 General Election. These days he lives in Tokyo with his wife and children. Was it this despairing view of British life and culture that led him to move abroad?

"I had personally reached a point of no return in 1992 and it did seem to chime with the times: 1991 to 1993 is an interesting period, during which reported crime rose 11% a year – over triple the 3% yearly average of 1981 to 1991. So something was clearly afoot in those miserable years. Of course, crime is falling now – apparently. But that point of no return came for me in Manchester – 'Gunchester' as it was then known. There was something in the air and, in retrospect, the death of James Bulger and the West case seem almost inevitable."

I had a very happy and secure childhood but I always felt a tremendous degree of menace beyond the garden gate. And the Yorkshire Ripper seemed to personify that dread

David Peace was born in Ossett, West Yorkshire in 1967. Inevitably, the hunt for the Yorkshire Ripper cast a gigantic shadow over his childhood and early teens. At the time, there was a genuine fear the Ripper might kill a woman you knew, or that he might even *be* a man you knew. This fear seeped into the Red Riding Quartet; so too did Peace's despair at the failure of the authorities to stop the killings. I ask him to what extent these factors informed his ambition to write crime stories.

"In most respects, I had a very happy and secure childhood but I always felt a tremendous degree of menace beyond the garden gate. And the Yorkshire Ripper seemed to personify that dread. My own reading during that time was very much Sherlock Holmes and Marvel Comics and it inspired me to try, as a ten-year-old, to catch the Ripper; making an office in the back of the garage, keeping the cuttings and so on. And, I think now, the seeds were sown with the collision of those events, at that time and place; and by my own personal proximity to it all."

As time passed Peace was affected by a growing idea that something more than chance had dictated that Peter Sutcliffe's atrocious killings took place in Yorkshire in the 1970s. The books examine a tinderbox of factors – venal and incompetent police; brutish attitudes to women; and the violence simmering below the surface of life in the centre of northern towns and cities.

I was a teenager in Doncaster at the height of Sutcliffe's reign of terror, and I remember all too vividly the despair, alienation and untrammelled aggression evoked by Peace. The sense of a community at war with itself was there, even before Mrs Thatcher's big push against the 'enemy within'. Does he believe there

was an unravelling of social cohesion that affected Yorkshire more than the rest of the country?

"I'm not sure; I actually feel that unravelling cut a swathe from Liverpool to Hull and all points North. The unhappiest times of my life were in Manchester and I think that city in particular, more than Leeds in many respects, most represented the post-industrial North – that alienation and despair that is most obviously captured in the music of Joy Division."

Music plays a huge part in Peace's books: he uses it for period detail, to develop an ironic counter-commentary on his narrative and to augment the reader's emotional response to his stories. I ask which other musicians have played an important part in his work.

"It does vary from book to book, and I do use the music of the times I am writing about as soundtrack and inspiration – for example, Bowie's *Diamond Dogs* and *Nineteen Eighty-four* were models for *Nineteen Seventy-four;* while Throbbing Gristle and Dante's Inferno were important to *Nineteen Eighty*. Over the years, the words and music of Mark E. Smith and The Fall have been important to me. But so too have the paintings of Francis Bacon and the films of Alan Clarke – these have all been pretty consistent sources – their very British voices and visions an inspiration."

Peace's physical connection with the north of England ended with his move to Tokyo, but his love-hate relationship with the region continues. All four of the Red Riding books were written in Japan, as was his latest novel, *GB84*, a multi-layered re-imagining of the miners' strike of 1984–5. And he's dealt with the critical events of his childhood and youth from the perspective of an adult with children of his own. How have the distancing effects of self-imposed exile, maturity and parenthood impacted on the way he's approached these stories?

"I'm not sure; some days I don't think I could have written the books I have, had I been living in England. But from 1987 to 1992 I was writing, albeit unsuccessfully, while living in the UK and I was writing about the Ripper – among other things. However, in practical terms: I do think the distance has given me the discipline, and the isolation has given me the time. Also, clichéd as it sounds, the births of my children certainly matured me and made me re-engage in a more political sense with the wider world. I think it's quite obvious which one of my novels was written by a lonely, drunken misanthrope."

Like the late Dennis Potter, Peace is an artist who ploughs the fertile furrows of his early life over and over again. Every time he does so, the process yields a new perspective on the development of our culture and – he acknowledges – an opportunity to explore and make sense of his own development. But isn't the process of conducting a narrative séance with the ghosts of your youth a dangerous and exhausting process?

"The 'transmissions' in *Nineteen Eighty* were tough. And so was the whole of *GB84* – it very nearly wrecked my marriage but, to some degree, dealing with the demands of this kind of fiction is a matter of choice."

Which brings us to Peace's most recent book, *GB84*, a conspiracy thriller based on sedulous factual research and, according to the author, an occult history of the miners' strike of 1984–5.

From where I'm sitting there's no escape from the miners' strike – even after 20 years. If I glance to the right of my VDU there's the framed certificate the National Coal Board gave my father after their cull of colliery managers after the strike. It commemorates his 44 years in the industry and is signed by the loathsome Ian McGregor, Chairman of the Board and Margaret Thatcher's hatchet man. It's a reminder of a big part of my dad's life, and a reproach to me: I should have done more to support the miners when it was, to borrow the words of Matt Johnson of The The, 'high noon at the UK corral'.

If I take a break from slaving over a hot keyboard for TTA and step out of my front door, I can see two hills hewn from the earth by artifice rather than nature. To the south there's an Iron Age earthwork; to the north, in the distance, a re-landscaped colliery tip planted with grass and trees. And, I have to admit, this part of Nottinghamshire has never *looked* better: thirty years ago it was the East Midlands' answer to Mordor, these days it looks like the Shire. Every trace of the mining industry has been swept away – pit tips; winding gear; black, towering chimneys; lowering buildings of leprous brick; and the carcasses of rusting, discarded machines. Time and European funding heal all wounds to the landscape.

But it wasn't just the trappings of industry that were erased in the fall-out of the miners' defeat: whole communities were fatally damaged. There are seven former mining villages within 15 minutes drive of my home: they're muddling along on government and EU support in the face of all the predicable problems: vandalism, child poverty, drink, heroin, soaring school exclusions, teenage prostitution, casual violence, burglaries and loan sharking.

But most people where I live – a commuter village that grew from a farming rather than mining tradition, and home to an unlikely number of management consultants – don't see any of that. For many, the demise of the mining industry is something that had a beneficial effect on local property prices. They do wonder, every so often, why their cars keep getting nicked. This may all seem a little romantic – I certainly wouldn't want my kids to work on a coalface – but I'm convinced the aftermath of the strike saw the loss of something good, something significant, from the national psyche. We lost, to quote the Scottish crime writer William MacIlvanney, the idea that 'we share in other people or we forgo ourselves'.

The major theme of *GB84* is how we arrived at this point in our socio-political development: how empathy with those less fortunate drained from British life; how our social cohesion fractured. Another concern is the concealed power of the British State and its willingness to resort to naked violence whenever subtler ways of influencing its subjects break down.

The book is charged with a feeling of regret that the miners were left to slug it out alone in the period when the sleep of reason had bred a monstrous (in every way) Tory majority in the Commons. And, I suggest to Peace, there's regret for the passing of an era when the people of this septic isle were a little less obsessed with share prices, the housing market and celebrities.

"As I did the research for *GB84*, I felt a tremendous guilt at the suffering and sacrifice of the striking miners and their families, and a real anger that a society which would make such sacrifices for other people and suffer for its beliefs was gone. So that sense of loss is certainly there, but I fight hard to keep it in its place, to fight against my own romantic and nostalgic notions of 'banners and bands'; we were all culpable in that loss, all complicit in making the new reality (then and now). As Brecht said: 'Do not build on the good old days, but on the bad new ones.'"

GB84 is crammed with deftly sketched thugs, union officials, financiers, pickets and political manipulators – their paths intersecting in a sinister, all-consuming conspiracy. I put it to Peace that the portrayal of historically based plots and intrigues in fiction is inevitably problematic: many readers see conspiracy as oversimplification – a denial of the chaotic and complex nature of life.

"I think, with no disrespect, the difficulties lie more with editors, publishers, critics and journalists – or with their

perceptions of the public. It's not really that long since *The Godfather* and Leon Uris's *Trinity* were atop the bestseller lists. So I don't worry, I just write what I feel needs to be written – chaotic and complex historical conspiracies."

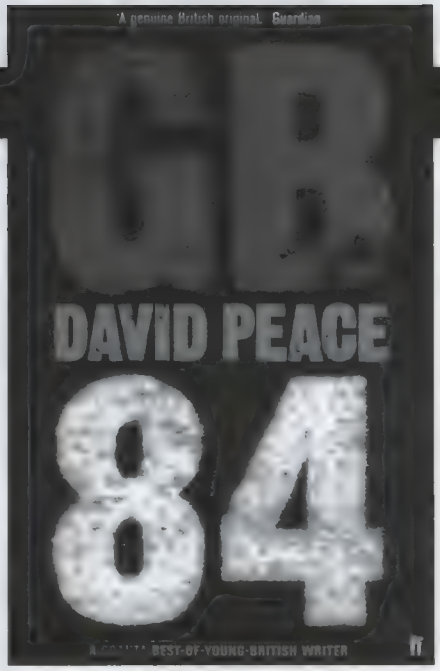
James Ellroy is the writer to whom Peace is most frequently compared, but his political engagement, formal innovation and stylistic invention place him in a tradition that is radical in every way. More apposite comparisons, moving beyond the obvious correspondence of genre elements, would be with John Dos Passos's *USA* trilogy and *Downriver* by Iain Sinclair. Peace has developed a mode of storytelling that includes reportage, interior monologue, dreams, bursts of prose-poetry, colloquial streams of consciousness and fast cutting between points of view – all fused with traditional elements of the thriller and historical epic. In *GB84*, he also interweaves a parallel narrative crammed with visionary references to a mythic version of England. What aspects of his subject matter drew Peace to this elaborate narrative collage?

"The very complexity of the 1984–85 Strike; the numbers of people involved; the various sides that were taken; the differing perspectives and so on. To try to portray that time from top to bottom, from left to right – it demanded a detailed and multi-voiced narrative."

Reviews of *GB84* tended to focus on its ironic take on recent history, its powerful evocation of place and its deft handling of the violence, hardship and chaos of the strike. But, for me, the symbol-strewn streams of consciousness are at least as important in getting behind the events presented in the newsreels, political memoirs and cuttings libraries. I ask Peace if he felt dealing with recent history through parallel 'realistic' and 'visionary' strands of narrative provided greater access to the truth behind a deliberately occluded series of events.

"The subject matter and the approach go hand in glove but, to some extent, there is an element of the 'idiot savant' at work. It really is how my mind works – or breaks; the documentary elements inspire the symbolic material and vice-versa: the dreams lead me back to their documentary source. The book is about the things we know, the things we don't and the things between."

Dissent is hard to articulate in an era in psychological thrall to the ideas and language of unrestrained consumerism and the free market. It's easy to forget what little we ever knew of the truth: for example, there's a widely held belief the miners failed because Arthur Scargill led



Faber tpb, 462pp, £12.99

them into a strike without an official mandate, but there *was* a ballot. Peace's description of *GB84* as an 'occult history' of the period suggests the collaboration of author and readers in a sort of narrative séance – to dispel the wall of illusion that still obscures the truth about the government's role in provoking, prolonging and breaking the strike.

"I was referring to the occluded facts about the strike and suggesting that to decipher the codes and symbols of the period you need to become a modern alchemist. I was also hinting at a supernatural element."

The book presents its people of power as modern black magicians: it's clear they disturb and fascinate the author. This is a vision that dovetails with the emerging historical record. The government and its co-conspirators used anti-union mantras and demonised Arthur Scargill; they wrote and enacted the brutal ritual of the battle between cops and pickets at Orgreave; and, finally, they re-made Britain in their image by a near-magical act of will. The title, Peace reveals, has its roots in the activities of these shadowy manipulators:

"Originally, it was to have flashbacks to the disputes of 1972, 1974 and 1981. However, ultimately, I felt these sections lessened the intensity of the 1984 narrative and almost came as a relief. But, from these narratives and other areas of research, I became intrigued by the private armies of 1974 and the various plots to unseat the Labour Government of Harold Wilson. One such organisation was David Stirling's GB75; hence the title. It's a period I plan to excavate in much more detail in my seventh book – *UKDK*.

"I plan very, very far ahead: the next two novels are *DUFC* and *UKDK*. *DUFC* is 'inspired' by Brian Clough's 44 days at Elland Road and is a return to Leeds in 1974. Then, as I said, *UKDK* is the fall of Wilson and rise of Thatcher – a prequel of sorts to *GB84*. I am also working on a quartet of novels that, hopefully, will document the rise of Tokyo from the Occupation to the Olympics – 1946 to 1964. The intention is, however, to pub-lish these in Japanese first. There will be another book about the Yorkshire Ripper too."

In other circumstances, the announcement of a fifth book set in an author's familiar milieu might suggest a focus on the 'ker-ching' of the tills in Waterstones at the expense of literary craft. But no one who has read Peace will have any doubt about his integrity. If he feels the rich seam of the Ripper is far from mined out, we can be certain the events of thirty years ago have something new to tell us about the way we live now.

The early twenty-first century is an era in which we're coming to the condition of political philosopher Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man*. The retreat from politics and spirituality has left a vacuum of meaning that's being filled by commerce.

We're distracted from the underlying reality of our world by the instant gratification afforded by easy credit, the acquisition of status symbols and the diversions of the entertainment industry. Why worry about inner-city shootouts, the war on Iraq or the Home Secretary's assault on civil liberties when we can immerse ourselves in the tacky glamour of Sarah Jessica Parker; the sexual shenanigans of Sven and Becks (in separate bedrooms); and the latest exhibitionist antics in the Big Brother House?

David Peace is one of those rare writers who can peel away layers of illusion and apply a forensic gaze to the rotting corpse of the British body politic. His work is an antidote to the complacency and cruelty that have led us here: by re-sensitising us to the horrors of the culture, he offers the slim possibility of the dream of something better. If we're to clamber out of the abyss we need to be aware that we're actually in it.

At the end of *GB84*, Martin, a flying picket, gets to the heart of the matter in a feverish stream of visionary consciousness:

Lord, please open the eyes and ears of the people of England. But the people of England are blind and deaf [. . .] Here where she stands at the gates at the head of her tribe and waits – Triumphant on the mountains of our skulls. Up to her hems in the rivers of our blood [. . .] and she looks down at the long march of labour halted here before her and says, Awake! Awake! This is England, Your England – and the year is Zero.

Mommy always told me and Cameron not to go looking for ways to reach the Old Tower. "There's ghosts and worse over there, Henry," she'd say. "You boys got to go wandering, fine, you're boys. But our people stay on this side of the river. Better yet, stick to the park."

The park was safe but dorky. When we were seven, that was okay.

This side of the river was home, Mabton and everything that was ordinary. When we were ten, that was okay.

Summer we both turned thirteen, well, there was nowhere else to go but across the water and up the hill. Mama must have known that – all us Puca boys got the wander in us, as Daddy says, but she just wagged her finger and warned us off, then packed sandwiches and said to stay out until dark.

Daddy worked in one of the mills north of town, where the river dropped through a series of falls and they could put in big waterwheels a hundred years ago. It was all steam engines and belts now, but that was where the buildings still were. He was a shift supervisor at Caliban Products, which meant he hassled the other kids' moms and dads about being late or taking too long in the can.

Mommy don't work. Daddy said she couldn't work down at Caliban, against the rules, and he wouldn't let her work for the competition, so she stayed home and ground peanut butter to sell at the farmer's market on Sundays and knit scarves longer than Daddy's pickup truck for church sales. She liked to spend her free time hollering at me for tracking mud in the house and such like.

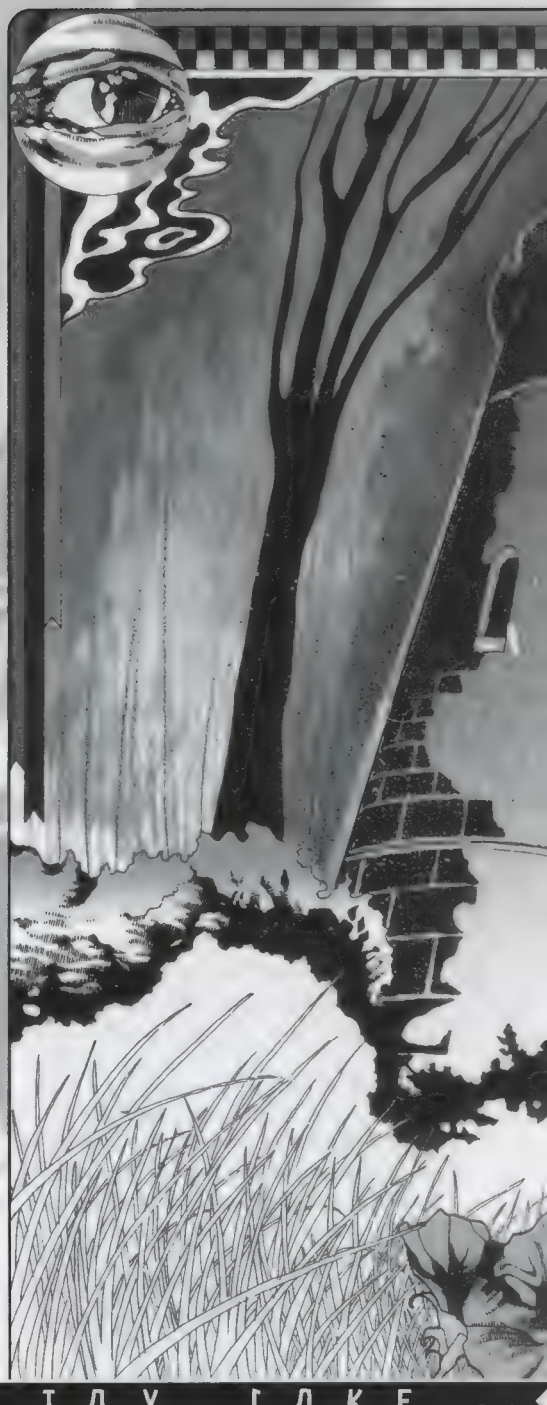
Cameron wasn't exactly my brother, really. He was Mommy's sister's kid, her twin that run off before I can remember, but nobody would ever say who his father was or even talk about him really was so I figured maybe it was Daddy. Me and Cameron looked a lot like twins ourselves.

Cameron lived in a little room in our basement, and never sat down to dinner with us, though Mommy left food out for him. She always shushed me when I talked about him around other people. He wasn't allowed to go to school with me, either. Which always seemed weird, because wasn't like there were a lot of kids in Mabton to start with. It's town full of grown-ups. There were plenty of empty desks down at the school.

Somehow, though, when Daddy got me a bike down at the People's Collective, he always came home with two. Somehow when Mommy finished going through the shoe bin down at Ladies' Aid, there was always a pair for Cameron.

He was the kid who wasn't there. Mommy said I was the kid who was never anywhere else. Maybe that was why me and Cameron got along so well. We were like ink and paper.

Every spring, though, when the ice broke up and the river flooded, then somebody ran a piece in the *Argus-Intelligencer* complaining of the fallow fields that glisten with morning dew, or the woodlots just waiting to be put to the axe, and maybe we should have a ferry or something, but there's 'reasons'.



The kind of reasons nobody told kids like me about, not even in school. They sort of oozed into me anyway, on account of those reasons were as deep in the bones of Mabton as the old trolley tracks under the street pavement.

Mostly, though, that river was out of mind. Except where the land flattened out downstream by the mills, there was a bluff right along the riverbank that sloped back down into town. Like maybe the river's course had been through the middle of town once and that bluff was an island. I guessed that's what kept it out of the Letters page of the paper – too much trouble for most people to bother with after a hard day's work. You had to climb the bluff to get a good look at the river and the fields beyond, and the hill above the fields, and the Old Tower high on the hill. Except for the Old Tower, gray stone with no roof poking above it, tilting slightly as if the tower had cause to fight the wind, the other bank of the river could have been the Garden Beneath like we hear in the stories at Saturday School.

Me and Cameron liked to sit inside the rhododendrons up on the bluff and spy on the deer that come down to drink in the river on the other side. Some of them were white as hutch rabbits, the bucks with racks wider than we were tall. Them pale deer wouldn't last a season on this side of the river what with rifles and hunting licenses. Over there . . . well, I believed it just might be the

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Garden Beneath, like Mother Arleigh always read to us about. Except in real life no one ever seemed to cross back into the Lands of Promise.

That didn't stop us. We sat in the bushes and whispered plots against the river.

"Maybe we could just swim."

"Current's too strong."

"How do you know?"

"Throw a stick in, dumb butt." Twinsies or not, Cameron had a harder mouth than me. Maybe that came of living next to the furnace. "Watch it go. That'd be you, screaming all the way down to the mill dams and the water falls."

Cameron was smarter than me, too. I wouldn't have thought of that thing with the stick. I worked at the idea a bit. "What if we start real far upstream?"

"Don't matter if you can't swim hard enough to cross the current."

"Ropes."

"What good's a rope unless you can tie it off on the other side? Where we ain't. Besides, where would we get ropes that long?"

He was right about that, too. The river was a hundred yards wide if it was an inch, counting the swampy bits at the foot of the bluff on our side, and the dark pools at the feet of the willows on the other.

"Rafts," I finally said. I was proud of that one. "We could build a raft."

Then the afternoon whistle blew down at the Boott Mills, always seven seconds ahead of the hour as Daddy liked to complain, followed by Caliban and the other mills. The busses began to grind people home in slow blocks as we ran back, me to Mommy cooking dinner in the kitchen and Cameron to his saucer of milk and plate of warmed-over scraps in the basement.

Mother Arleigh had a face like a preacher, but she was sweet as ice cream most of the time. Her wimple never seemed to fit her right, and I always figured deep inside all that service to the Lady and prayer and everything was some ancient little kid who wanted to ride the swings right past the puking point just like the rest of us. Sad part was, that same lost kid part made her bitter-mean when she wasn't set to be kind. Like Mommy's blender, Mother Arleigh only had two settings.

That Saturday she was on the bad one.

"'Suffer the little children,' it says here," she screeched, banging the Scriptures so hard that her lectern wobbled. One of the felt angels slid off the teaching board behind her. "Well, I'm not going against the Lady's word." Her voice dropped to a hiss. "So which one of you little apes put soap in the tea kettles in the church kitchen?"

To a kid, the eight of us giggled. I mean, who wouldn't?

The church bulletin from last Saturday had said this week's Saturday School lesson was the Seven Secondary Virtues. I had spent all week memorizing them, writing the list of Virtues out on the backs of gum wrappers and inside the folds of those little napkins from the ice cream truck. Soap in the tea kettles wasn't a virtue of any kind, but it was still pretty funny.

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"Smart alecks," Mother Arleigh snarled. "Ruined six ounces of perfectly good Siamese green." She banged the lectern again. "*This* isn't what the Lady meant when she told us to keep clean tongues in our heads."

She didn't intend the joke, but we all fell out laughing just the same. Mother Arleigh's pinched face turned the color of my old wagon, and she commenced to whaling into us with the pointer she used for the felt board lessons. "I will teach you all to mind!"

The pointer got me hard on the elbow and I busted out into a shriek despite my desperate thirteen-year-old resolve to be cool. Mother Arleigh immediately dropped to her knees and gathered me in an awkward hug. "Henry, Henry, please forgive me my boy," she said, her voice a whisper burred by tears.

She wasn't angry no more.

"Hey," I said, trying to push her away, but Mother Arleigh grabbed on to me harder, until the other kids laughed at *that*.

Instead of blushing into her scratchy old wimple, I concentrated on the Seven Secondary Virtues – evenhandedness, punctuality, orderliness, patriotism, thrift, industry and cleanliness. Their first letters made a little word that helped me remember them in order. "I am epoptic," I whispered, as Mother Arleigh's dry old lips smothered me with kisses and she wept like I was her own baby lost.

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Iatея, ше над ѕеяцiкеѕ. ддддц шаѕл'т тнеяе, алд оғ ѕоuяѕе Cameron never came, but Mommy smiled up at me in the men's gallery from her seat in the front row.

Sometimes, at services, and once in a while at home, I would catch her in the corner of my eye and see someone else. It was like Mommy was bigger than she was, something huge and substantial that had set a fingertip down into this world.

Then she'd laugh, or roll her eyes at some monkey-clowning of mine, and she was just Mommy again.

That day at church, she was big every time I looked away from her. It was like having an invisible mammoth in the room, huge and hairy and warm, with tusks longer that an automobile and breath like a dying swamp, but you never could quite see it, even when you had to step around it.

Maybe it was Mother Arleigh's homily. She had her vestments on now, white robes trimmed with gold, her silver athame and her golden sickle dangling from her belt. Her pinched little face glowed with the light of the Lady as she talked about the Lands of Promise and the fate of the Lady's people.

"When we left the Garden Beneath, we were wrong." Her voice was sweet and smooth, like honey on bone china at solstice feast. She paused, staring out over the women of the congregation on their crowded benches, all dressed in their Saturday best, then up at us in the men's gallery.

Though 'us' was just the few boys from Saturday School and a pair of truckers in from their long-haul sheep run looking for their Saturday prayers. Local men didn't like the services much. There weren't enough local boys for me to get away with skipping.

"Not many are left of us who can recall the Bright Days, let alone the Garden Beneath. There are few enough who have even heard the stories first hand. Our people did only one thing *right*." She banged her fist against the pulpit, which boomed like a drum. "We asked the Lady for a promise. In Her wisdom, She heeded our prayers. Even though . . . " Another round of staring. "Even though we were *fools*!"

"Fools!" shouted some of the women below. Mommy just wore her little smile.

Mother Arleigh raised her hands in burgeoning ecstasy. "Who remembers the brilliant banners, the horses running like wind before a storm?"

"I do," called old Mrs Grimsby, who most days couldn't remember to wear her underthings on the inside of her clothes.

"Who remembers the days of our power, when the swords of our men and the words of our women were the writ unto the uttermost corners of the sea?"

"Yes!" screamed one of the women. "I do! I have dreamed on it!" I didn't know her, but I was fascinated when she jumped up out of her pew and began rolling in the aisle. "We were there. We were all there. Na ba lo ka ti ko na! Hai ba la ba ko na!" She commenced to shrieking and crying.

"Miss Blackthorn has been touched by the spirit of the Lady," said Mother Arleigh, settling her hands back to the pulpit. Her voice was almost normal. I realized she didn't want to compete. I'd never considered services that way before, and it made me uncomfortable.

We all watched Miss Blackthorn writhe around shouting for a while. She slipped almost out of her clothes, which I thought was the most interesting part, then two of the other ladies finally led her away.

Mother Arleigh looked around. Her fingers drummed on her pulpit like a death march. Mommy still had her little smile though most of the women were downcast now. I kept seeing my mother's flickering hugeness in the corner of my eye. Was it the homily? Or was something wrong with me?

"We all know the promise. We all know what was given to us, to our ancestors, to *you*, Mrs Grimsby."

"Praise the Lady!" shouted Mrs Grimsby.

"Praise the Lady," echoed Mother Arleigh. "We were given what?"

"The Lands of Promise," all the women shouted, even Mommy. Some of the boys around me started giggling, but not me. This was the best kind of service, on those rare weeks when they really got going like this.

"When was it given to us?" Mother Arleigh called.

"When the end began!" they responded.

"When will we receive it?"

"When we have earned it!"

"And have we earned it yet?"

The women burst into such a lot of howling and cursing that it was fit to deafen me. *Caterwauling*, Daddy called it, which was why he mostly went down to the Switchman's Rest and drank with the rail workers on Saturday morning. He didn't hold with mixing with his mill workers.

I watched Mommy, who sat still smiling as the rest of the women were on their feet, shaking loose their hair and tearing at their clothes, wailing death chants and curses. Mommy seemed bigger then, right before my eyes instead of in their corner, but at that moment Peggy the altar girl tugged the curtain into place and shooed us all out of the men's gallery while the women practiced their ancient mysteries to much screaming and howling hidden from us below.

Danny Elphinstone had tried to peek in the church windows once, when the services had gotten hot and heavy like today. He'd been struck blind and dumb and had to be sent away for three months to recover. When he came back he didn't remember none of his friends. Like a whole new kid, with blank spots.

Me, I scampered home to Cameron to plot against the river. When I got back, there was note on the nail on the back door, in Mommy's handwriting.

Henry – Baked potatoes in the bucket on the stove. Make the best of your day. Don't go near the Old Tower.

"Яошвоатѕ," Самеяол ѕаід аѕ не ѕлашед ол а ѕсяар оғ ротато skin.

"Rowboats?" We'd been counting the fish jumping on the river, in between straining our eyes for the distant, snow-capped peaks that could sometimes be glimpsed rising above the hills on the west bank when the weather was just right and the air was heartache-clear.

"We could get across in a rowboat."

"That ain't no different than a raft," I complained.

"Sure it is." He grinned, his clever-ape grin that let me forgive him any annoyance, then held up two fingers. "First, we don't have to build it like we'd have to build a raft. Second, rowboats have oars. We could get across the current."

"And where are we going to get a rowboat?"

He just stared at me, still grinning. It was something obvious, something he knew and I should have known.

Then I shivered. The mills.

Some of the mills, Daddy's Caliban included, kept little boats for inspecting their discharge pipes and checking the surviving old waterwheels that sometimes still creaked like the walking dead.

"We can't do that," I said.

"Why not? We stole Timmy Grapevine's scooter last spring."

"Yeah, but we gave it back three days later. And Daddy doesn't work at Timmy Grapevine's *house*."

If we stole from the mills, any of them, not just Caliban, and got caught . . . I couldn't even imagine the shame. Or the beating Daddy would give me. And for something like that, Mommy wouldn't stir to stay his hand. She'd just smile and shake her head. I could foresee the consequences of failure with the same certainty that I could foresee the sun rising tomorrow.

"So you're soft now, Henry?" Cameron leaned close, until I could smell the sour milk and coal dust on his breath. The warmth of him made the little hairs on my arm tingle. "River's too much for you, got you scared."

"No." I pushed him away, hands to his chest. A spark popped between us, like winter static, a tiny glare of blue that surprised me though he didn't seem to notice. "I ain't scared. I'm sensible. Besides, we can't take a boat from the mills. We'd have to haul it two or three miles upstream to be sure of getting across before the current took us down to the mill dams and waterfalls."

Cameron's grin stretched so wide it threatened to split his face in two. "Bluff'll hide us from view, once we get away from the mills."

"We don't have the keys," I said. My ground was getting weaker, I knew. "Those fences are topped with razor wire."

"Your Daddy's got the keys to Caliban."

Our Daddy I thought. On days like this, Cameron was like me in a black mirror, every nasty thought I ever had seeming to fill his head.

"We'll be lucky if he kills us."

"Then we just won't get caught, will we?"

The other side of the river. I looked across the water. The fields gleamed in sunlight, the forests beckoned with their cool green halls. Above it all the Old Tower rose like a finger pointed toward Father Sun. In that moment, I could even see the crisp snowcaps of those distant mountains to the west. Something glinted from high up in the Old Tower.

That decided me.

"I know where Daddy keeps his work keys on the weekend," I said.

Cameron hugged me. "That's my Henry."

Did I love him or hate him, my almost-brother? I couldn't say as I gathered the pail and the napkin and picked my way down the slope, through the scrubby forest of little, twisted pines and silver-barked aspen toward the streets of Mabton and our small house.

Our family lived in a frame house on a brick foundation. The basement was low-ceilinged, dirt-floored except for the brick pad under the furnace and the little utility rooms where Cameron lived and where Daddy stored his tools. Everything else was a domain of sacks of half-rotted root vegetables, old crates and straw bales and an endless war between rats and cats.

Where the underside of the house was like a little nightmare with Cameron as the demon at its heart, upstairs was pin-neat and ruler-straight. Mommy didn't believe in dirt. With the time Daddy's job forced upon her she proselytized mightily for the forces of cleanly order. She was the Seven Secondary Virtues in the flesh.

It wasn't a big house – two bedrooms, a main room and the tiny kitchen, plus the indoor bathroom that had once been a porch and was now Mommy's pride. I knew other kids, like Peggy, lived in brick houses with two or even three bathrooms that had heat in them in the winter, but her father was a judge and things were different for people like that.

We were proud of who we were and what we had. Mommy filled the place with flowers and curious, twisted sticks and odd charms that people like old Mrs Grimsby made her, plus the curious little misfirings that came from the china works at the clay pits east of town. Mommy had a passion for strange and broken things, as long as they were clean, neatly presented and well arranged. Daddy sometimes complained about it, but not much.

It was his complaining that led me to knowing about where Daddy hid his work keys. They'd had one of their rare fights, and Mommy had said, "It's no worse than your closet of glory, Jack Puca."

Then they'd both glanced at me, Daddy shamefaced and Mommy with a sly wink, and gone on to discuss other things.

Well, I knew there weren't any spare closets in the house. It wasn't like we had much spare of anything, unless you counted Cameron as a spare for me. So one time when Mommy and Daddy were both out, at a ward meeting I think, I looked in their room real good, until I found a trapdoor above their tiny clothes closet. The trap was hard to see in the boards of the ceiling but I'd been looking closely for just such a thing.

Once found, it wasn't difficult to open. I'd climbed up on top of Mommy's wool basket and chinned myself into the attic space.

I don't know why Mommy called it a closet of glory. It was pretty inglorious. First of all it was small. Daddy had to have bent over to fit up there, with the stuff that was already crowded in. I struck a match to light my candle and see what was at hand.

There was a saddle, like for a horse, though it took me a few moments to realize it wasn't just a badly-made footstool. The leather was old and cracked but it had silver chasing on it in long flowing lines that looked like leaves or narrow-bodied dragons. I bent and looked close. I couldn't see why we were so poor if Daddy had silver hidden away, but then I spotted where there had once been jewels on the saddle, pried out so that only tarnished little prongs remained.

I imagined him up here, stealing his own jewels one by one to stretch his pay packet on a cold winter's week. The thought hurt my heart. I looked around more.

A broken spear lay in three pieces against one corner of the tiny closet. There was big piece of cloth rolled up

next to it. I touched that cloth – silk. More stuff, too, a sort of sleeveless shirt of metal rings. It was armor like in the books of old stories. A sword with no grip, just a narrow tongue at the end of the blade. Had Daddy sold that grip off too at some point? A crown of leaves that when I touched them were metal, corroded to black. I rubbed some of the black off to find they were copper.

And junk. Lots of junk.

This wasn't glory. This was shame. He'd fought in the long-ago wars of our people, then laid down his arms to become a mill worker. What kind of man did that?

As I went to chin myself back down, I noticed that right by the trap door was a little pegboard with hooks. On one of the hooks hung Daddy's work keys.

It was to the closet of glory that I led Cameron that Saturday afternoon.

"Gee, цоия house is so like *ир неяе*," Самеялол said. He was whispering, though.

"Don't track any dirt," I whispered back. At the door to Mommy and Daddy's room, I put my hand up. "Wait here. I'll get the keys."

"I'm coming, butt crack," Cameron hissed, and pushed me into Mommy and Daddy's room ahead of him.

Their bed was almost as high as my chest, with a quilt made from a lot of strange-colored old scraps. It looked like autumn leaves to me sometimes, and sometimes like bloodstains from a secret murder. Two dressers, a lamp made from an old woman's shoe, and a little shelf with a few books. Plus more of Mommy's weird things.

There was an oval mirror and two pictures on the wall. One picture showed a desperate woman in a rowboat, a tapestry trailing into the water over the side. I chose to take that as a sign that we were doing the right thing in stealing Caliban's rowboat. *Borrowing*, I corrected myself. We'd put it back when we were though.

The other picture showed a battle, men on horses with long spears and banners flying, flowing over a wall to meet an army with guns and cannon. We were losing. Even though it was only done in shades of gray, by someone who wasn't an expert hand with a pencil, that picture seemed to be a glimpse of a real moment in time.

Was that how Daddy's spear had broken?

one of Mommy's hatboxes. The keys came with me, but there was a cracking sound above.

"Bones of god," I cursed – something I almost never did. Cameron was the privy mouth of the two of us.

He jumped up and chinned himself into the closet of glory.

"Get *out* of there," I almost shouted, tears of frustration standing in my eyes. There was no way I could hide that I'd been in the closet. Now I'd have to think of a really good story to explain why, and I was afraid I couldn't.

Cameron leaned over the opening to look down at me. His eyes and teeth seemed to gleam in the shadows above, which made him a monster version of me. "There's some cool crap up here. How come you never told me about this?"

"Because Daddy would kill us both and tan our hides for seat leather. We're already in deep doo-doo. Get back down here before you make it worse."

He stuck his tongue out at me, then dropped in a cloud of attic grime and his own special burnt stink of coal dust.

The closet was an unholy mess.

"We'd better clean up here," I said.

"Rowboat!" Cameron shouted, snatching Daddy's work keys out of my hand and sprinting for the front door.

It took me a moment to figure out that Cameron with the keys was worse trouble than the mess we'd already made, then I was after him.

Midsummer Avenue was the main street on the west side of town, where we lived tucked up against the bluff. It petered out south of Mabton to a gravel lane among orchards of hazelnuts, but in front of our house it was wide enough for mill busses, automobiles and horse carts to all pass each other at once. To the north it ran through downtown, where it acquired a double row of guardian cherry trees, then into the mill district before it ended at the gates of Caliban Products.

When he was feeling proud of his work Daddy liked to say the Puca family needed no other street. If Mommy was around, she would smile at him and remind him that the church was on Oak Street, and didn't we need that, and that his horrible little tavern was on Coal Street, and he seemed to need that as well against all common sense.

It caught Cameron's eye, too, and he stopped to stare. I slipped open the closet door while he was looking at the wall and fished for the catch to the trapdoor. I didn't really want Cameron to know about Daddy's closet of glory – bad enough that my almost-brother was upstairs in the first place.

Not bad with me, I meant, but bad with Mommy and Daddy. If Cameron was okay, he wouldn't have been living in the basement.

I stopped, one hand brushing the edge of the opening above me. I'd never thought of it that way before. When I was little, I figured everybody had a brother in the basement. Later on, it was just the way things were.

Why *did* he live down there? Like a big rat or something.

Then I hopped up to grip the edge with one hand and reached around for the keys with the other. The effort made the muscles of my arm shiver.

"What you got up there, Henry?" Cameron asked. He startled me and I yelped, dropping to the ground to crush

Right then Midsummer Avenue was the Puca family racecourse. Cameron was ahead of me by fifty feet or more. The keys jangled with every slamming step of his feet. I was mortified that I had to chase him down, scared that I wouldn't catch him, and terrified that someone would see him with that big ring of keys and somehow know what they were. And more to the point, tell Daddy later.

I knew I couldn't catch my almost-brother by sheer speed. He was always a few steps faster and few punches stronger than me – had been all my life. But even on Saturdays Midsummer Avenue was busy. Cameron was glancing back at me, grinning. I was watching for cross traffic, a turning truck or a horse cart pulling away from a delivery.

Cameron actually ran flat in to a brewery truck emerging from a side street as he looked over his shoulder. He bounced off like rubber ball to make a couple of feet of air before landing on his butt in the gutter. I sprinted and caught up just as he was back on his feet, tackling him to pull him down to the curb.

"Give me the keys right now," I said, "or it ends here."

"No boat?" He jangled the keys in front of me, keeping them just outside my reach. "You going to fly across the river, bro?"

"We're already *so* busted thanks to that mess you made back at the house. You want the rowboat, we do it my way."

Cameron laughed, his ape-grin on his face, and tossed me the keys. "Okay, little Daddy. Whatever you say."

"I say we walk like normal people. Don't draw no attention to ourselves. And see what's what when we get down to Caliban."

"Caliban, Caliban," Cameron chanted, "I just can't understand, what it is that any man, would hope to find at Caliban."

"And shut *up*," I told him.

Lady, he was annoying. I prayed that never in life would I act like my almost-brother.

Caliban Products stood before us, its ash-darkened stacks rising into the sky like three brick fingers echoing the magic of the Old Tower.

The mill was a complex really, spread out across a number of buildings, but it was all centered around the main plant and the powerhouse. The main plant was more than a quarter mile of brick, four or five stories high, though with only one level within – Daddy had given me a tour once, when the management had decided that a Family Day would be good press, he'd told me. Windows like fields of little square panes filled the walls of the main plant though most of the glass had been replaced with wood or cardboard or just painted over. Ornamented eaves hosted tribes of pigeons.

The powerhouse hulked by the river. Windowless as a prison, it gave an impression of bulky age though it was in fact one of the newest buildings. Daddy had explained to me that when the waterwheels were decommissioned and the great steam boilers brought in, Caliban had razed the old millhouse to its foundations, strengthened the brick and concrete courses where they anchored to the exposed rock of the riverbank, and built it all over again.

That was where we wanted to be. The boathouse would be tucked in to the foundations on the river side of the powerhouse.

I glanced around. We were before the main gate. Though no one seemed to be watching, it struck me as foolish to open that up and march right in. I knew there was a smaller gate to our left where the Caliban property met the Boott property. "Come on," I said to Cameron, and headed that way.

Inside the fence nothing moved. Railroad cars sat heavy and long on their rails, waiting to be drawn within the plant buildings or to carry coal to the powerhouse. Bricks and concrete stamped out any inch of nature that might have once existed. The buildings were all dark and age-grimed as the stacks.

It was like a great prison designed to confine the spirits of men and exclude all of nature.

No wonder Daddy went to drink with the railroad men.

We came to the little gate close by to where the walls joined. There was something carved in the stone arch over the door that I couldn't understand, even if hadn't been badly weathered. LASCIATE OGEN SPERANZA it read. Boott had a similar small gate just to the left that also opened onto the broken concrete of Midsummer Avenue's sidewalk. I imagined old man Caliban and old man Boott slinking out here on a stormy day to share cigarettes and plot their business, dividing competition and talking over which troublesome workers should not be further employed in Mabton.

Daddy had a lot of work keys and it took me a nerve-wracking time to find one that would fit the gate. The first I tried wasn't the right one and I had to keep working through different keys. I was afraid of being caught at any moment, a fear that multiplied whenever one of the occasional trucks grumbled past behind me.

The whole time Cameron chattered on about the liberating power of hard labor. As if he'd ever done any work in his life.

Finally we were inside Daddy's Caliban. We sprinted for the powerhouse though I knew that would mark us as troublemakers to anyone watching. Those banks of grimy windows had become too much like blank eyes to me, and for some reason I feared the ear-splitting shriek of a steam whistle.

All I heard besides the slap of my feet and the banging of my heart within my chest was Cameron laughing like one of the loons that came to the river in late autumn.

The boathouse was simple enough, a little shack between two piers of the powerhouse. I could see where the old axles of the mill wheels came out at the top of the foundation course. Before me were the brick shoulders of the now-broken dam that had once held Caliban's waters back. No need for the harness when the horse was gone.

Cameron applied himself to the boathouse lock, so I stared across the water. The river dropped through several stages of rapids or falls here. It was divided at the midpoint by a massive granite shoulder that was a smaller imitation of the bluff separating the bulk of Mabton from the water. That shoulder had allowed Caliban and Boott and the other mill builders to extend their will outward without actually touching the other bank and straying into the Lands of Promise with the dust of work upon them and cold iron in their hands.

I studied the ruined stones of the dams and the odd outcroppings of riverbed. Someone with determination and a good standing broad jump could make it out there, halfway across. Which made me wonder exactly what the river looked like on the other side of that big rock. Had the men who built the dams simply stopped there and turned their backs? Or had they looked onward with hope in their eyes?

Daddy might have been among them. Mommy had told me he'd worked at Caliban since the mill's founding sometime early in the last century. Proud as he was of being a shift supervisor, Daddy didn't talk about his history.

The closet of glory had shown me that.

"Got it," called Cameron behind me.

I turned to see the boathouse door open. He was already stepping into the shadows within. The lock lay upon the ground, hasp broken free from the old wood.

I could have cursed him for a boggart. We would be discovered *again*. I would be so deep in trouble there would

never be another free day at Sunday market for me in my life.

There was nothing for it but to follow him.

The boathouse went far back into the foundations. There were racks like great wooden shelves empty of anything but dust. Cobwebbed ropes and chains hung. A tiny rowboat sat right behind the doors on a little sledge. Two oars stuck up from it like the skeleton of some very simple creature.

"*This* is going to take us across the river?" I couldn't keep the quaver from my voice.

"Solid as a rock," Cameron declared.

"Rocks don't float."

He grinned, grabbed an oar and banged it against the side of the boat. "See, tight and riverworthy."

"You knocked a hole in it," I pointed out, my heart sinking.

"Oh."

I sat down, exhausted. We'd stolen Daddy's keys, made a mess at the house and here at the mill. We were going to be caught, half a dozen times over, and in more trouble than I could imagine.

And I wasn't any closer to the Old Tower.

"Oars are good," Cameron said.

Oars. Ropes. All the things we'd wanted before but lacked.

"Grab them," I told him, feeling smarter than my almost-brother for once in my life. "Oars, and as much of the rope as we can carry that isn't already rotten."

"You building a raft again?" His voice was almost jeering.

"I'm going to *walk* across the river."

The late afternoon light had caught some of the golden glow of the far side of the river. The world was a jewel in amber. Milky white seeds soared on a wind that carried a scent of fresh-blooming flowers.

I stood on a boulder, watching the river drop fifteen or twenty feet just below me, and considered my next jump. Cameron waited two hops behind me with most of our load. He was within an easy rope toss if need be.

If there was ever a day when I would spread wings and fly like Ikarus of the Brass Islands, this was it. I could feel the call of the Old Tower pulling me ahead even as Caliban's sullen glower pushed me from behind.

In that moment, freed by water and the timeless light, I felt a profound sympathy for my father and all the long, pointless years of his life.

I sucked in my breath and leapt to land square on the wet boulder perhaps five feet ahead of me. With a shout of joy, I leapt to the next one, then the next, scrambling over the river and the remains of the dams in a bounding flight until I reached the granite wall at the center of river. There I stood panting and waited for my almost-brother.

He was not far behind, scrambling up with the ropes and the oars. "You can carry this stuff a while," Cameron announced. He tossed his load to the scrubby grass at our feet before laying down to rest.

I studied the far side of the granite. There was perhaps forty feet of channel between the cliff below me and the next jumble of rocks. From there it would be another series of hops to the shadowed willows where the fireflies already gleamed even though the westering day was still bright here in the middle of the river.

My heart ached to be across. I would find a way to be on the other side if I had to make the leap from where I stood.

But what a mighty leap that would be. Close to our right on the downstream side was a single fall that accounted for all the distance of the little jumps and rapids and cataracts on the mill side of the river in one great tumbling roar of water that vanished over the edge in rock-filled spray.

I paced the granite shoulder to the south end, upstream farthest away from the pull of the waterfall. It tapered there to a little gravel beach where tiny fish darted among the shallows. The channel was a bit wider at this end. Looking back up the granite slope to where Cameron lay, I saw dozens of cracks and fissures in the old rock.

Oars and rope. I smiled and headed back for Cameron's abandoned load.

Of course he followed me down the second time, chattering the whole way. "No boat, no wings, no magic boots. He's going to sail a rope across the river, our Henry is. You're nuts, bro. When we go home, I'm switching with you. You can sweat out your nights to the clanging of the furnace while I sit at the table upstairs. Because I'm the one who can appreciate it. Not you, no, you're the nutter who thinks he's a nixie or something."

He went on like that. I ignored him as I shoved one of the oars deep as it would go into a crack near the south end of the granite. Then I tied off the longest rope we'd salvaged and walked it back up the hill to estimate its length.

Not enough.

Another rope, then, and double-hitch them together. I worked at that a moment as my almost-brother's voice ran down. Stripped my clothes and shoes off and rigged a third rope for a sling around me. Fastened the second rope and my clothing bundle to it. Finally I looked up at him.

Cameron was grinning his ape-grin again. "I'm proud of you, Henry."

"Thanks." I was suddenly struck shy.

"When you drown, can I have your room?"

"I am epoptic," I told him. "The Lady carries me in Her hands." Then: "Hang on to this end of the rope. When I get across, I'll tie down the other end so you can follow."

He hugged me, quick and rough. "I have always loved you."

I thought no more upon it. Instead I jumped into the river, which was shocking cold and tasted of the coming evening. Arms wrapped around the paddle, I kicked into the current making for the other side. I would not let the falls just downstream concern me.

I had read the books of old stories, of the bright days when our people in their glory and their ignorance rode from the Garden Beneath like a storm upon the earth. To me, those stories all had a single point: that the banners were more brilliant, the sword-edges sharper, the loves truer in those old times than any tired modern imitation could be in our world of clocks and hunting licenses and pay packets.

I didn't know about that. I was a boy, sharing my childhood with Cameron in a town among a people who have few children in their long years. Daddy or old Mrs Grimsby

might have slain gods when they were young, but now we all shopped at Diana's Market and rode the bus out to the Town Fair on Midsummer's Day.

But one thing I know from the old stories. There are moments in life when the Lady stays time's hand and people can see the map of their existence unfolded, all their choices written out in a glowing script.

The river gave me one of those moments.

It was cold, cold as iron in the night. It had a fist that gripped my chest tight as I'd squeezed any frog I'd ever caught. My ribs ached in the first moment. My lungs burned though my head remained above the water. My entire body echoed to the rumble of the falls. That tumbling water called to me with a voice almost as powerful as that of the river's other side.

I could have let go, slipped my knots, and slid smiling over the precipice into sharp-edged chaos. Only the wonder of that glint high in the Old Tower kept me going at that moment.

Then my purpose reasserted itself and I began to swim in earnest. Rope or no rope this was a perilous crossing. I kept the second oar clutched to my chest as both float and cargo and kicked as hard as if I were fighting Cameron over the last scrap of some sweetmeat. Harder, really, for though he sometimes seemed to have no limits to his ferocity, I never really meant to hurt my almost-brother.

The rope was long enough to let me reach the other side. It was short enough to hold me back from the falls should my strength fail in the cold dark water. But only if the knots held and the oar remained true where I had grounded it in the crevice. Only if Cameron watched over me.

Still, mere seconds had gone by as I thought over my choices and fates. I kicked again. The river was like Mommy, bigger than I could imagine, but close to me every moment. The river was like Daddy, a cold and distant power that drove my life. The river was like Cameron, worrying at my heels to make me stronger and better than I would have become on my own.

The rope jerked then. Cameron? I could not turn to look. He would haul me back if he needed to. I continued to kick.

The cold was getting worse, a wintry iron straining the muscles of my legs and lungs. I had considered the distance and difficulty of the swim but not the temperature. The Old Tower still called me.

Why did Mommy keep warning me away from it? I would no more have thought to cross the river on my own than I would have thought to fly to the moon.

Daddy never spoke of it. Kicking again, I realized Mommy had never spoken of it in Daddy's presence, either.

The rope jerked another time. Not hard, though. That must be Cameron paying the line out. The falls continued to rumble in my bones. My fingers and toes were numb. I wondered if I should have kept my clothes on.

Kick.

Why had no one ever gone to the Old Tower? Daddy and a handful of his drinking partners could have found a way across this channel.

Kick.

Even my thoughts were slowing. The falls called to me in voices of wonder, promising rest. My arms and legs were wood. Lead. Stone.

Kick.

I knew why we had left the Garden Beneath. It was not large enough for our people's honor and glory. The apes had been spreading across the world building villages and temples of their own. We had meant to show them a thing or two.

Kick.

Now we were no different from them.

Another tug upon the rope.

Kick.

My legs were slower. The falls were louder. The Lands of Promise were close. All I had to do was slip the knots.

Kick.

My fingers fumbled at my chest, but the wet ropes defeated them. I found it hard to hold the oar and do that, so I let it go.

Kick.

Where was Cameron, when he should be rescuing me?

Kick.

I began to tumble, nearly in the grip of the falls. Then I hit a rock, bounced off another rock with a bruising jolt to my shoulder. I struck a third with my jaw so that blood bloomed in my mouth.

My hands grabbed on without further thought. Something tugged at my back like the bite of a fish, then my foot found another rock.

I pulled myself upward, spitting water and blood, until I was wedged above the river though still in the freezing spray. I rubbed sweat and my eyes and looked across the channel.

Cameron stood there hugging Daddy. Another man was close by with a rifle raised to his shoulder. His head was wreathed in smoke.

My father glared at me above my almost-brother's shoulder.

I scrambled up and away as rock chips flew. I heard no shot, but the falls overwhelmed my ears. My foot caught in a cleft, skin scraping to the bone as I pulled it free, but I kept going. Something plucked at my ear, then the rock in front of me exploded. I closed my eyes and kept on climbing, over the top of a boulder and out of sight of the other side of the river.

No, my side of the river.

I was on the other side now.

Back against the rock, coughing up water and blood, I waited for my lungs to work again. When they finally did, I picked at the knots of my rope until my clothes came free, and dressed in the freezing garments. Then I worked my way across the rest of the river for the safety of the willows, away from bullets and not-brothers and un-Daddys and whatever had gone wrong at home.

I slept weeping that night high in a willow tree set back from the bank. Noises echoed from across the river, booms and bellowings and something much like Mommy's voice except far too large and deep in volume. My cold and my fear combined to an exhaustion that ignored all else.

Looking through the willow leaves into the orange glare of the rising sun, Daddy's Caliban was a castle of the Bright Days. The smoke-grimed stacks were towers set to chal-

lenge the armies of the Earth.

Then I woke a little more and saw only cold iron and failure.

At least no one stood on that granite rock in the middle of the river with rifle in hand.

My entire body ached. My head split with the pain of a river-cold. My nose ran and my eyes were swollen. If this was the Land of Promises, the Lady had lied to us.

I smiled at the thought. What would Mother Arleigh say to me now? *Get out of that tree, you little ape*, most likely.

So I climbed to the ground. I had to be two or three miles north of the Old Tower, and considerably down hill. Battered and chilled, with no paths through these woods, it would take me most of the morning to reach it.

"Mommy," I told the indifferent midges that swarmed the riverbank, "I am going where you sent me."

Дяоилд лоол I шаlкеð ѕlошlц иріll тняоидн тне ɡоlðел fields that I had always been able to see from the top of the bluff. There were no pale stags today. Only the sun's welcome heat and the cycling buzz of the grasshoppers. The slope stole my energy and gave back only a deep stitch in my side, so I took my rest on a tumbled stone.

As I sat I turned to look across the river. Seen from this side, the bluff was a steep-kneed cliff topped with the rhododendrons and scraggled copse of woods I knew so well. There were caves in the face of the cliff, which surprised me. It had never occurred to me such openings might be down there. Did they connect anywhere in the town?

I watched a while. Things moved in the cave shadows. I even glimpsed a glint, an echo of what had finally drawn me to the Old Tower. Binoculars? A camera, maybe.

I began to wave when another thought occurred to me. *That glint might be the sight of a hunting rifle.* They were watching me. Had they always been watching me?

That ended my rest. I kept walking, zigging across the fields both to lessen the slope and to make myself harder to see from Mabton.

As I climbed the Old Tower rose above me like a thin stone moon. This close I could see that it was built from huge stones much bigger than any single man could lift. Some had shifted or cracked, which lent the Old Tower its distinctive angle.

But it was definitely *built*. It was by far the oldest thing I had ever seen.

Except, I realized, for Mrs Grimsby. And anyone else in Mabton who could remember the Garden Beneath from their own lifetime.

That made me understand how little my life meant to those people. I was no more than a swamp midge to Mrs Grimsby, or Mother Arleigh, or even Daddy. To anyone who'd ridden under the brilliant banners of the Bright Days, whether or not they remembered the Garden Beneath.

Only Cameron understood me. And he had betrayed me to Daddy.

I stopped just outside the Old Tower. Was this what the Lady had promised us? Had we earned the Lands of Promise?

And who was I to the Lady anyway?

Builder of bridges, perhaps.

I laughed at myself. These were grand dreams for someone who had been the target of bullets.

I stepped through the high, narrow door into cold shadows.

Тне Оld Тоwея ðіðл'т яеаllц наце ѕтаіяѕ. Мояе liке ѕlімвілɡ blocks set into the wall in a rough spiral. There was a stone floor with a narrow gap like a grave leading downward. The interior of the tower stretched above me, a chimney to a ceiling perhaps forty feet high. There was no sign within of anyone who had ever lived here or held this tower against their enemies.

It might as well have been a cave.

Something gleamed in the gap at my feet. I stepped around to look down a narrow stone stair. A ghostly bluish light shimmered in the dank dark. It was the exact shade of the spark which had passed between me and Cameron.

I squinted. What was I seeing? Armor, maybe. Like grave goods.

Or Daddy's closet of glory.

There were swords there, too, with their own light. Had this been the glint I had seen from the tower walls, some glimpse of martial glory? My blood stirred. The war horns would be brassy and proud. This time we would have guns, too, for we had come to abide the feel of cold iron all too well.

But I was tired and chilled, with no stomach for the darkness beneath the earth. This crypt could not have gleamed to me from across the river, I, realized. So I headed for Father Sun instead. As I climbed the tower wall I found that my arms and legs ached from the river. My ears rang, either from my river-cold, or from the close call of the shooting. My breath hurt. But I still climbed, knowing I would find something. Something had glinted from this tower. Something had held Mommy's attention and my imagination all my life.

After a while I came to the ceiling. There was a narrow crack in the capstone which blocked the tower shaft. Sunlight glared through it like a mirror of the grave of glory at the base. I squeezed through, picking up a few more scrapes along the way.

Above was like the battlement of a castle in an old story. There was a wall, varying from knee-high to chest-high in random order as the shapes of the stones dictated. But there was nothing here, either. No glint or goddess or voice out of history.

I leaned against the wall facing the sun and cried for a little while out of frustration.

"I am epoptic," I told the sky, then took a nap in the warm sunlight.

Iатея шнел I ашоке I ѕтооð ѕтіFF вит ѕlеая-неаðеð алð looked back across the river. The Old Tower was higher than the bluff. I could actually see some of Mabton beyond, as well as the mills downstream to the north. The sun was heading west, already behind me and again the day was filled with long, golden light. The fields and farms east of Mabton seemed enchanted. The ribbon of the railroad headed through them like a highway back to the Bright Days.

Closer to me, the river's edge below the bluffs seemed as mysterious and filled with portent as this side ever had when viewed from over there. The mills almost glowed

in the amber light.

Our people have purpose.

The thought surfaced in me like a leaping fish. We no longer die on sword's point. We don't fight wars with the apes or duels with each other. We heed steam whistles and go to church and drink ourselves silly and buy peanut butter at the Sunday market and live out the long days of our lives in something like peace and harmony.

It is the small miracles of kitchen and paycheck that are our Lands of Promise. Not the war horns and bright banners, nor the endless plenty of some mythic paradise.

"Thank you, Lady," I said. I understood Her purpose now, and Her promise as well. I climbed down before daylight fled the tower.

At the bottom, where dusk already gathered among the cold stones, I looked once more into the gap that led to earth below. That blue glow still flickered. It was Oberon's vault, a closet of glory for our entire people. There would be weapons and relics below to stir our people to a revival of the Bright Days once more, however brief and doomed that might be.

Again I could hear the war horns blaring. Had I come here by night I might have first followed that glow down in the earth. I would have missed the Lady's message waiting for me above.

Or perhaps She had prepared more than one message for me.

Did the Lady care which direction her people followed? Or only that we followed some direction.

Outside, Cameron sat on a tumbled stone eating an apple.

I couldn't find it in me to be surprised. "Have you come to kill me?"

He took a huge bite, juice streaming sticky down his chin. After he'd chewed and swallowed Cameron grinned his ape grin. "They think you're me, now. I told Daddy I'd gone crazy, and you'd pushed me into the river."

I? You?

"And he brought a rifleman out there just for that."

Cameron shrugged. "He didn't know it was us who'd broken into the mill."

"So what are you doing here now?"

His eyes glinted like stars. "Maybe I'm lying. But not all of time. Not everything I say. Truth, Henry. There's some folks mighty worried about what you might have found or raised over here. Like old man Caliban. Other folks, like Mommy, well . . . she's sort of holding back the tide right now."

"The caves in the cliff?"

He shrugged again. "Rich people want things, too. All their money can't buy their way into the Lands of Promise. You're the first person to cross the river alive."

"What about you?"

Cameron leaned in close, so that I could smell apple and onions and coal dust. "We're the same person, Henry. Only Mommy ever saw us different. Only Mommy made us different."

The hair on my neck prickled. I remembered her greatness, that vast presence I saw out of the corner of my eye. "You're lying again," I said, but I didn't believe myself.

He shrugged, then dropped the half-eaten apple into his pocket. My almost-brother – perhaps my almost-self – led me down to the river bank where a little boat was wedged into a marshy shallow. He might have come across on it. If he had, he'd made it seem as if the boat had drifted in.

We both got on board. I took the oars to row across. On the way we talked about church and school and the Sunday market and which kind of candy was best at Pinfaire's Emporium. The current caught the boat and pulled it, but I stayed firm on the oars.

When the boat ground into rocks just above Boott's Mill, I was alone. I couldn't remember exactly when Cameron had left. I hadn't heard a splash. A half-eaten apple sat on the boat's other bench. When I picked it up, a blue spark jumped from the apple to me.

My brother had come home.

Then men with guns met me there, and a constable, and Peggy's father the judge, along with Daddy and Mommy both.

"Well," said Daddy in his roughest, you're-going-to-get-a-whipping voice.

"I have seen the Lands of Promise," I answered loudly, so that everyone could hear. Some of the guns clicked as they were cocked. "We are living in them even now, on this side of the river."

Ил тне елд, ло оле веliецед ме вит Момиц. Тнец all аядиед a while, for years in fact, but no one else seemed tempted to cross the river to see for themselves.

One night a month or so after I'd returned from the other side, Mommy showed me Her fullness, by way of a parting gift – or perhaps a terror. "I have given you back all of yourself," She told me in a voice like mountains groaning. "I am sorry that I cannot give you back to your mother, too." Then the Lady kissed me and was gone on the autumn wind.

I still see blue sparks among the leaves sometimes in that season, and hints of the banners that would have flown again had I gone down into the earth below the Old Tower. When the leaves burn in piles, I know what would have become of those banners. Just like the picture on the wall of Daddy's room.

Peggy likes me these days. Maybe we'll be together and have a kid of our own sometime in the next century or two. Old man Caliban told Daddy I could have a job in security down at the mill when I finish school. When our paths cross Mother Arleigh looks at me with a faraway sadness in her eyes. Since Mommy left, she and Daddy drink together down at the Switchman's Rest on Sundays, though they try to hide that from me.

Someday when I am very, very old and all my life's secrets are long past mattering, I will tell Mother Arleigh that I know who she really is and that I love her too.

Jay Lake lives and writes in Portland, Oregon, USA. In 2004 he is both a Hugo and Campbell nominee, and his fiction appears in a wide variety of markets, including a new collection, *American Sorrows*, featuring a reprint of 'Daddy's Caliban' as well as his Hugo-nominated novelette 'Into the Gardens of Sweet Night'. Jay also co-edits the *Polyphony* anthology series. He can be reached through his website at www.jlake.com and his message board on the TTA website's discussion forum.

Jay appears in our first issue of *Interzone* (IZ:194) with a Science Fantasy novelette called 'Dreams of the White City'. This is out now!

JAPAN'S DARK LANTERNS

THE SHADOWS BENEATH THE RISING SUN

JOHN PAUL CATTON

If there were an award for the hardest-working man in Japanese cinema, it would doubtless go to the director Takashi Miike. For the last fifteen years, he's put out an alarmingly high number of films every year, including disturbing and thought-provoking features such as the *Dead or Alive* series, *The Bird People of China*, *Audition*, *Ichi the Killer* and *Zebraman*. He has the knack of exploring themes that most people would rather not think about, and blending them into roller-coaster movies with the gore factor turned up high. His recent horror movie, *Chakushin Ari* (AKA *One Missed Call*), is a good example of how thought-provoking his films can be – as well as skin-crawlingly scary. *Chakushin Ari* is also the possible curtain call for Japan's psycho-horror films. Having enjoyed a good run, the movement that started with the *Ring* series in the late 90s will return to its straight-to-video roots – until the next genius (the way things are going, it'll be a Korean director) appears to shake up the genre.

Appropriately enough, the storyline of *Chakushin Ari* references films that fueled the horror boom, specifically Hideo Nakata's *Ring* and Kiyoshi Kurosawa's *Kairo*. Instead of videocassettes or computers, this time the dead are reaching out to Tokyo's inhabitants through the mobile phone network. College student Yumi Nakamura (Kou Shibasaki from *Battle Royale*, *Kakashi*) finds that her friends are receiving mysterious voice mails on their mobile phones – calls dating three days ahead. In the calls they hear the moment of their own death, a death that despite all efforts comes at the appointed time of the call, with Nakamura always present as the witness.

In the hands of a lesser director, this would be just another *Final Destination*-type shocker, but Miike's skill lies in how he handles one of the film's themes: both the undead antagonist and the film's heroine are victims of child abuse. The film's resolution is typically Japanese, but it's miles away from the climax of Nakata's *Dark Water*. In *Chakushin Ari*, the mother becomes an authority figure both ambiguous and terrifying.

It's a theme that is uncomfortably close to home in modern Japan. Long known internationally as a nation that values its youth, Japan has seen an unprecedented 400% rise in cases of child abuse between 1997 and 2002. A glance through the daily newspapers would suggest that the figures are still rising. A 2003 report issued from the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare uncovered an equally disturbing fact: in the reported cases, 22% of the abusers were the children's fathers, but 63% were the mothers.

What has shocked the population is not just the numbers involved, but the bizarre vindictiveness of the individuals involved. An electrician tries to 'cure' his infant daughter of chest pains by applying electrical shocks to her bare skin. A truck driver and his common law wife starve their teenage son almost to death over a period of two years. A husband and wife leave their sick child to die of exposure on the side of a mountain, in an ironic reversal of the Japanese legend of poverty-stricken families carrying their aged parents up the slopes of a mountain when they can no longer feed them.

Although it's never possible to find a single cause for disturbing trends like this, Japan's weekly magazines (the equivalent of our tabloids) have lost no time in finding scapegoats. Just as Britain's right-wing press always regard the 'permissive society of the 60s and 70s' as the source of all modern society's evils, the Japanese weeklies go for the 'Bubble Economy' of the 80s and the children brought up in it. The weekly magazines are attacking an entire generation for being materialistic and selfish mothers and fathers, who regard children as nothing more as accessories. As further evidence, the weeklies also point to the current 'pet dog boom' – the tendency to regard dogs as surrogate children. Men and women in their 20s and early 30s have been conspicuously lavishing money on cute little Chihuahuas and miniature dachshunds, and expensive pet-related toys such as dog houses, clothes, exercising equipment and canine beauty salons offering mud packs and aromatherapy. Seriously.

Perhaps it is time to ask some basic questions. Questions about whom our children really are, and what we do to them. How should we view our own children? As our property? As individuals in their own right? As the basic right of a human being to perpetuate itself? An investment for the future? Something cute to make us feel all warm and fuzzy?

A husband and wife leave their sick child to die of exposure on the side of a mountain, in an ironic reversal of the Japanese legend of poverty-stricken families carrying their aged parents up the slopes of a mountain when they can no longer feed them

Why do certain individuals abuse children with such vindictiveness? Is it because they despise the sight of frailty and dependence? Is it because kids are easy targets who can't fight back? Or is there something about childhood that makes all adults fundamentally uneasy?

When we're not reading about adults abusing children, there are plenty of cases of children abusing other children. In June of this year, an 11-year-old girl in Nagasaki lashed out at her classmate with a paper knife, fatally wounding her. After police questioning, the unnamed girl claimed that she'd been angered by insulting comments that the victim had posted on the girl's homepage. High-tech communication meets low-tech violence; an archaic part of the backbrain comes to the fore with a shocking and unexpected immediacy.

In the same month, a ten-year-old girl pushed her five-year-old friend off a fifth-storey balcony. The boy mercifully escaped without serious injury. At the time of writing, this weekend's newspaper tells of a drunken high school girl, who stabbed a total stranger passing by on the street, for no apparent reason. Did the children actually *learn* to behave like this? Or is violence always there, buried like a race-memory, closer to the surface in young minds?

Because of Japan's falling birthrate, children comprise a record low 14.1% of the population, continuing the straight 22-year decline. You would have thought that this would make the nation treasure their own youth and think seriously about what kind of future they want to give them. But instead, parents are reluctantly waking up to the idea that they have aliens in their own homes – and treating them as such.

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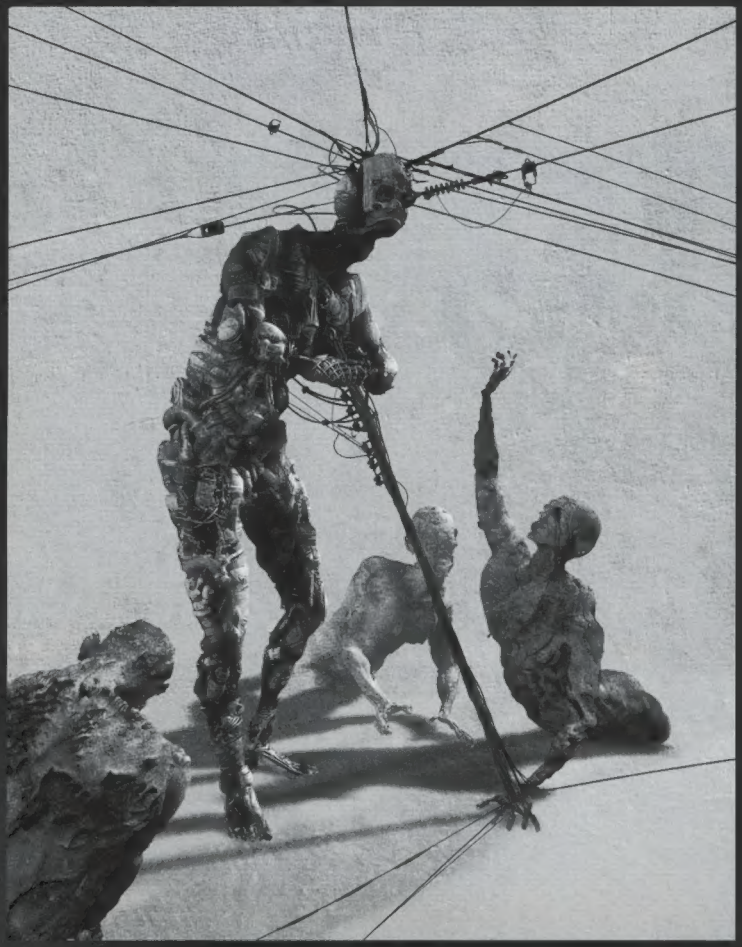

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